MODERN
Villainess
IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING
A CORPORATE EMPIRE
BEFORE THE CRASH
WRITTEN BY
TOFURO
FUTSUKAICHI
ILLUSTRATED BY KEI
NOVEL
2

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Teia Eiichi
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BEFORE THE CRASH

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WRITTEN BY
Tofuro Futsukaichi

ILLUSTRATED BY
Kei

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MODERN VILLAINESS: IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING A CORPORATE EMPIRE BEFORE THE CRASH VOL.2

Gendai Shakai de Otome Game no Akuyaku Reijou wo Suru no wa Chotto Taihen Vol. 2
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MODERN *Villainess*

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Cassandra's Struggle

TOUDOU NAGAYOSHI

Advisor to Keika Corp.'s former head of resources supply at the Iwazaki Corporation.

KAIHOUIN HOTARU

Runa's friend. Comes from a noble religious family. She's unfindable in hide-and-seek.

KOIZUMI SOUICHIROU

A politician in the House of Representatives for the Fellowship of Constitutional Government. Former Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare.

IZUMIKAWA TATSUNOSUKE

A dietman in the House of Representatives and a member of the Fellowship of Constitutional Government. Current Minister of Finance.

TOKITOU AKI

A maid of the Keikain household. Likes cameras.

SAITOU KEIKO

A maid of the Keikain household. Formerly revered for her night business in Ginza.

TAKANASHI MIZUHO

The main heroine of the otome game, "Love Where the Cherry Blossom Falls."

TEIA SHUUICHI

Head of the Teia Group and Eiichi's father.

KATSURA NAOYUKI

Works in the Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank's integrated development department.

TAKAMIYA HARUKA

Manager of the Imperial Gakushuukan Academy's communal library.

MAEFUJI SHOUICHI

An inspector who works in Foreign Affairs for the National Police Agency's Public Safety Bureau.

KATSURA NAOMI

A descendant of the Keikain bloodline. Has a son named Naoyuki.

MODERN Villainess

IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING A CORPORATE EMPIRE BEFORE THE CRASH

CAST OF CHARACTERS

KEIKAIN RUNA

A villainess reincarnated into an otome video game world set in modern society.

IZUMIKAWA YUUJIROU

Youngest son to Dietman Izumikawa Tatsunosuke. A potential love interest.

TEIA EIICHI

Son to the family that owns Teia Motor Co., Japan's top automobile enterprise. A potential love interest.

TACHIBANA RYUUJI

Keikain Runa's personal butler. Supports Runa in both public and private affairs.

GOTOU MITSUYA

The only son to Gotou Mitsutoshi and a budget analyst in the Ministry of Finance's budget division. A potential love interest.

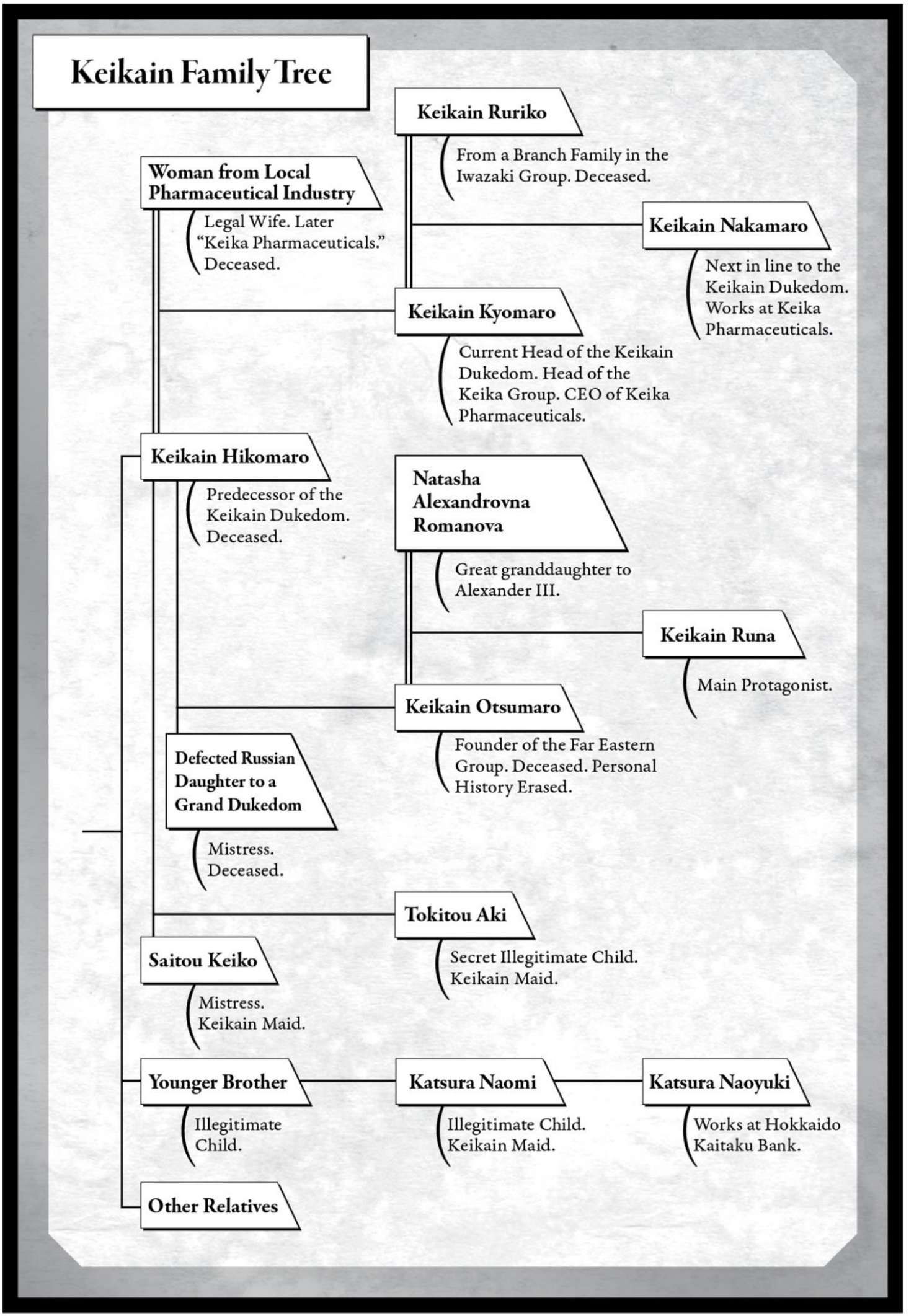
KASUGANO ASUKA

Runa's friend. Her father is a dietman in the House of Representatives. Calls mandarins "oranges."

ICHIJOU SUSUMU

Branch manager at Far Eastern Bank's Tokyo branch. Set up the Moonlight Fund alongside Tachibana.

Keikain Family Tree


Keikain Ruriko
From a Branch Family in the Iwazaki Group. Deceased.
Woman from Local Pharmaceutical Industry
Legal Wife. Later "Keika Pharmaceuticals." Deceased.
Keikain Nakamaro
Next in line to the Keikain Dukedom. Works at Keika Pharmaceuticals.
Keikain Kyomaro
Current Head of the Keikain Dukedom. Head of the Keika Group. CEO of Keika Pharmaceuticals.
Keikain Hikomaro
Predecessor of the Keikain Dukedom. Deceased.
Natasha Alexandrovna Romanova
Great granddaughter to Alexander III.
Keikain Runa
Main Protagonist.
Keikain Otsumaro
Founder of the Far Eastern Group. Deceased. Personal History Erased.
Defected Russian Daughter to a Grand Dukedom
Mistress. Deceased.
Tokitou Aki
Secret Illegitimate Child. Keikain Maid.
Saitou Keiko
Mistress. Keikain Maid.
Younger Brother
Illegitimate Child.
Katsura Naomi
Illegitimate Child. Keikain Maid.
Katsura Naoyuki
Works at Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank.
Other Relatives

Chapter 1:
The Sullivan Report

On Keikain Runa: A girl from the Japanese Keikain Dukedom, and the real owner of the foreign-run Moonlight Fund. We have been wary of her due to her deceased parents' connection to the East and her blood relationship to the powerful Romanov House. In regard to the Asian and Russian financial crises, we have moved to monitoring her outright, as her Moonlight Fund did much to increase its influence during these events. A document detailing the stock holdings of the Moonlight Fund is enclosed. I will now go on to explain her ownership of the Keika Group.

On the former Keika Group: The group is supported by cross ownership with Keika Pharmaceuticals at its center. This business's main bank is the Imperial Iwazaki Bank; the Keika Group additionally has a decent relationship with the Iwazaki Zaibatsu.

Keikain Runa's ownership in the Keika Group comes mainly from the shares formerly held by the Far Eastern Bank, now inherited by Keika Bank. It is our understanding that she has made no move to completely take over the Keika Group out of respect for her uncle, Keikain Kiyomaro.

An internal reshuffle of the group led to a merger between Keika Corp and the Akamatsu Corporation. Keika Maritime Insurance and Far Eastern Life Insurance merged with the Teisei Department Stores Group's damage insurance and life insurance companies and are now moving under the umbrella of Keika Bank. Please note, as mentioned before, the Keika Group's main bank is the Imperial Iwazaki Bank, *not* Keika Bank.

The group's central company is Keika Pharmaceuticals; Keika Chemicals comes next as per the seating order of the Choufuu

Council. This, however, is controversial among the other companies. A privately held company, Keika Pharmaceuticals shares are majority owned by the Keikain House, with the Imperial Iwazaki Bank, Keika Bank, and other financial institutions holding fewer shares in the company.

Keikain Runa herself holds few shares in the group. Instead, the Keika Bank holds most of them, having inherited some from the former Far Eastern Bank, and she controls Keika bank. Her personal shares are held by the Moonlight Fund, which owns Keika Hotels, Keika Bank, Akamatsu Corporation, AIRHO, and various other enterprises.

On Keika Hotels: The Keika Hotels group was born from Far Eastern Hotels, the first company to come under Keikain Runa's ownership. It now stands independently, having absorbed Triple Oceans Hotels from the Teisei Department Stores group. Other global hotel groups offered to buy out Triple Oceans Hotels, but those offers were declined.

The Hokkaido resort developments—formerly belonging to the Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank—are moving forward with collaborations with companies from Hokkaido's tertiary industries. Developments in Kyushu's hot spring areas are also being worked on.

Additionally, there is the redevelopment of the former head office of the Nihon Credit Bank in Kudanshita, which is set to become a hotel. Considering the likelihood that this building will become Keikain Runa's corporate headquarters, there are many who think the Keika Hotels group is to be managed under her direct control.

On Keika Bank: A bank born out of dealing with Japan's bad debts, it was essentially nationalized. In the fall of 1998, the Moonlight Fund purchased it at auction for eight hundred billion yen.

It is under Keikain Runa's significant influence. The Moonlight Fund is normally affiliated with Keika Bank but was treated as a separate entity in this particular case.

Keika Bank was created from a series of mergers including Far Eastern Bank, Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank, the Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan, and Nihon Credit Bank. Keika Securities came about as a merger of Sankai Securities and Ichiyama Securities. Along with Far Eastern Life Insurance and Keika Maritime Insurance, they comprise a group of their own.

Due to concerns from within and without over it becoming an institutional bank, management has promised to list Keika Bank on the stock market within the next five years. As it has finished dealing with its bad debt, Keika Bank has assets of high value, including those of the Moonlight Fund and Akamatsu Corporation. Its market capitalization is said to exceed three trillion yen.

The Diet is currently discussing plans to lift the ban on bank holding companies as part of Japan's financial big bang. Should that goes ahead, Keika Bank is expected to become a model case for deregulation.

On the Akamatsu Corporation: A general trading company, the Akamatsu Corporation resulted from a merger between the Akamaru Corporation, the Matsuno Trading Corporation, and Keika Corp, to deal with those companies' bad debts. Keika Bank and the Moonlight Fund are majority shareholders, with Keika Pharmaceuticals holding a lesser share. The shares held by Keika Pharmaceuticals come from Keika Corp being a part of the newly merged company.

For a time, there were rumors of financial difficulty within the corporation. However, it has gone on to take advantage of the strong yen to buy up as much as possible and sell if off for significant profits.

This is largely due to being bolstered by the Russian financial crisis and the crash in resource prices.

Making use of the extensive networks available to general trading companies, the Akamatsu Corporation has become a center for organizational restructuring within the Keika Group, taking on the bailed-out Teisei Department Stores group as a subsidiary and working to rid that group of its bad debts.

On the Teisei Department Stores group: Owing bad debts in excess of 1.57 trillion yen, the Teisei Department Stores group was bailed out by the Keika Group and is now aiming for organizational restructure. Its financial enterprises have been passed on to Keika Bank, its hotels have been passed to Keika Hotels, and its department stores, supermarkets, and convenience stores have gone to Akamatsu Corporation. Its business model of using the Akamatsu Corporation's vast network and the former Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank's relationship with Hokkaido's primary industry to send fresh food products directly to Kanto has been a success, as has its organizational restructuring.

Once the restructuring is finished, the plan is to list the group on the stock market to gather investments, but there is a high likelihood that it will hold on to around 30 percent of its shares.

On AIRHO: A start-up company partly financed by the government, it was launched with the cooperation of Hokkaido's local government and the prefecture's financial circles. While it struggled with lack of capital at the start, the Moonlight Fund, with its links to the former Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank, invested in the start-up, obtained management rights, and then launched a private-aviation project to run alongside its low-cost aviation business.

It absorbed the helicopter business of the Teisei Department Stores group, and now offers to fly those in high society from their doorstep directly to the airport.

General comments: Within the present Keika Group, there is a strange tug-of-war underway between the former parts of the group, which want a presidents' council to control the group, and the other companies, who want Keikain Runa to maintain her independent leadership.

Those who have openly addressed Keikain Runa's exceptional talent are few and far between. Those looking to curry favor with her using her age have come up against her attendants, Tachibana Ryuuji, Ichijou Susumu, and Toudou Nagayoshi.

Through her classmates, Keikain Runa has contact with Dietman Izumikawa Tatsunosuke of the Fellowship of Constitutional Government. Notably, she assisted in his return to glory. Not only has Dietman Izumikawa become the party's vice president, Dietman Yanagitani Yoshiyasu of his faction has been appointed as chairman of the Financial Reconstruction Commission. We must therefore bear in mind Keikain Runa's massive influence over the financial section of Japan's government. It should be noted that Vice President Izumikawa has unofficially expressed concern to Japan's American embassy about our monitoring of Keikain Runa.

[OMITTED]

In conclusion, should things continue in this vein, Keikain Runa has the potential to exert significant influence over Japan's political and business spheres. We cannot allow her to side with the USA's enemies. My suggestion is to maintain our monitoring of her and find a way to procure her as an asset of the United States of America.

—Angela Sullivan, Data Analyst at Japan's US Embassy.

***

GLOSSARY AND NOTES:

Institutional Bank: A bank that collects funding only for certain companies and parties. One of the indicators for identifying a zaibatsu in pre-war times was whether or not the group had one of these institutional banks on their side.

Bank Holding Companies: A centerpiece of Japan's financial big bang. As well as having the advantage of being able to manage banks, brokerages, and insurance companies under one roof, these companies facilitate clever tricks such as using a smaller subsidiary bank to swallow up a larger one. Without these, Japan's recovery from bad debts would have been an even slower process.

Keika Group
桂華グループ

KEIKAIN DUKEDOM

KEIKAIN KIYOMARO

FUND

KEIKA HOTELS

HOTEL

AIRHO

AIR

CHOUFUU COUNCIL

KEIKA PHARMACEUTICALS

- Keika Chemicals
- Keika Shipping
- Keika Storage
- Keika Maritime Insurance

KEIKA BANK

BANK

- Keika Securities
- Far Eastern Life Insurance

Filed for corporate rehabilitation

- Far Eastern Life Developments

AKAMATSU CORPORATION

TEISEI DEPARTMENT STORES GROUP

※ *Correct as of the 1998 Councilors Election*

Chapter 2:
The Grade-Schooler and Her Place
Fuchigami's Regime

"OUT SIGHTSEEING?"

"No. I'm handling some business."

When I woke up, I was on the west coast. Truly, anybody would get hooked on private jets the moment they experienced the luxury of using one.

Once I was done passing through immigration, I climbed into a helicopter and headed for Silicon Valley. On the east coast, Wall Street was having a field day; meanwhile, Silicon Valley was celebrating our new heyday.

"Welcome, Your Majesty!"

We were in the Moonlight Fund's main building in Silicon Valley. Today, it was hosting a party for technicians. The party was originally for investors, but when it came to IT, it was better for those with money to let the techs network amongst themselves.

Unlike most parties, this one was full of California's finest geeks. Therefore, the tables were loaded with potato chips, fried chicken, pizza, and soda: food that was bound to fatten them up, if they weren't fat already.

Tachibana was accompanying me. His face visibly screwed up when he saw the delicacies on offer.

"Hey, your butler's looking a little uncomfortable. I guess they didn't think about your health when they set all this up, huh, milady?"

"We did actually! See? This here's health food for ya!"

The two men loudly laughed together. They weren't being sarcastic either; they were talking about the potato chips and how

they were made from “vegetables” and, therefore, healthy.
I suppressed a sigh and only barely managed a smile, which I wasn’t sure was convincing in the least.

Health aside, these people were technicians of the highest order. It was time for me to bring out the souvenirs.

“Thanks so much for inviting me! I brought just what you requested!”

I’d come prepared. The technicians cheered behind me as I loaded the large TV with a VCR I brought. Some anime series flashed brightly upon the screen, and then the technicians were in an uproar.

Their attention occupied, I turned mine to the wallflower.

“What are you doing here, Angela-san?”

“Well, I’m here because *you’re* here on the west coast. I was in economy class for ten hours because of you.”

She was so out of place in her evening gown, it was enough to stop anyone from talking to her. She must have expected a party of investors only to be met with *these* guests instead. It was a real shame for her. She reminded me how unlucky someone could be, at least.

“I can get you a business class ticket for the return trip, if you’d like.”

“No, thank you. I’d be fired for receiving special treatment.”

The two of us gazed at the anime playing on the television screen. It was a cross between science-fiction and thriller, and the tech geeks loved it. I got myself a paper cup full of cola—a one-liter cup. There was no way I’d be able to finish it.

“This only just finished airing in Japan, and for some reason, everyone in the states is wild about it. I’ve heard of people going to the store late at night to reserve the video. It’s like they want to recreate that world themselves.”

“I have to say, it disgusts me to think that might be the future awaiting mankind once we rid ourselves of our natural bodies. Although, I do think those things might give the USA an advantage if they were produced in real life,” Angela remarked, glancing at the screen with her wine glass in one hand.

I owned a recording of the anime in question, so I’d watched it on the plane on the way over, and it sounded like Angela had already seen it as well. Working for the CIA was a tough job.

“I did warn you.”

“Isn’t it a little harsh to be tailing me when we won by default?”

We switched smoothly to the topic we really wanted to discuss. Even at a party, we weren’t about to let our guards down.

“Thanks to a certain *somebody’s* absence, the Moonlight Fund ended up selling off several of its shares.”

That operating system was currently the de facto standard, meaning the internet was about to spread to households worldwide on a massive scale. That had set the Moonlight Fund’s high-tech shares ballooning at a rate that made me want to laugh uncontrollably just thinking about it. The funds from the Keika Bank auction gave us a temporary cover to set those profits too.

“I’m jealous, you know? We’ve been incredibly busy cleaning up after that collapsed Wall Street fund. And now you’re getting into resources?”

“Buy low, sell high. That’s the golden rule of business.”

Along with the funds we were bringing in from the sale of Keika Bank, we’d made it official that we were going to get into the resource business. We would start with oil via our merged company coming this fall: the Akamatsu Corporation. The global financial markets were still in an uproar thanks to the Russian-influenced ruckus on Wall Street, but the Moonlight Fund was sidestepping the drama and instead buying up resources at cheap prices.

“That’s true. Just don’t forget that you are always being watched.”

“Don’t you forget that Japan’s ruling party expressed its concern over that in kind.”

After the establishment of Fuchigami’s cabinet, Vice President Izumikawa, who had made his triumphant return to the party’s center, quietly expressed his concerns to the US embassy in Japan. Perhaps it was his way of thanking me. None of this concern was official, but the CIA knew better than anybody that the US’s public persona would take a hit should it be made public knowledge.

“I think it’s about time I took my leave. I’m not prepared to watch *this* go on for another six hours straight.”

“Of course. I look forward to seeing you again.” I smiled pleasantly and offered Angela my hand, which she took. Her handshake was just a little firm.

The next day:

“Your Majesty! I want to build it! Please, could you fund the project?!”

Sure, just leave the money to me. It’ll take you about ten years to build anything that exceeds the limits of anime.

The interesting thing about phone calls was that the other person’s voice was the only thing to go by. I’d heard that 90 percent of a person’s impression of someone was based on appearance, so when that was taken away, you had to make the extra effort to acknowledge the person on the other end of the line as an individual.

“I’d like to ask your opinion on bailing out Ayukawa Motors, Your Little Majesty. Have you any thoughts about that?”

Prime Minister Fuchigami. Did he really think that was an appropriate question to ask a small girl?

“I don’t think it’s possible, investment or no investment,” I said.

Ayukawa Motors was Japan’s second most successful automobile manufacturer, famed for its innovative technology. However, due to poor sales and overinvestment around the time of the bubble’s burst, it was burdened with interest-bearing debts close to two trillion yen. The automobile industry cast a wide net over the economy, and many jobs were in danger if Ayukawa Motors went under. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry, unable to leave that alone, wanted to take the lead and bail the company out.

“Why do you think that?”

“There isn’t anyone with a grand enough plan for the company’s rehabilitation. My bailout plan in the retail industry is simple enough for a grade-schooler to understand. Deliver fresh produce, which people like, to customers further away. It’s nothing more complex than that. For automobiles, you need someone who understands industrial craft or else you won’t come away with anything good,” I said.

There was also the matter of dealing with the debt from the firm’s excessive investment during the bubble, but I didn’t mention that so as not to derail the conversation. This man led an entire country—he should have been aware of that much himself.

“You think that, despite Ayukawa being famed for its technology?” he urged.

“Prime Minister, there’s a difference between a product a company thinks is good and a product *consumers* think is good.”

Several of Japan’s twenty-first century companies made mistakes for that exact reason. That may have been one reason why Japanese companies switched gears so that their earnings came from intermediate goods such as parts and machinery rather than consumer products. Japan’s automobile market, on the other hand, was a sparsely populated and competitive one which *did* produce finished goods. That was why, when it came to saving one of those companies, my opinion aligned with Prime Minister Fuchigami’s.

“What do you think about a bailout merger with Teia Motor Co.?”

“Steering clear of antitrust laws would be a pain, and I doubt Teia would be up for it, considering the scale of Ayukawa. I would recommend a merger with Tazmi Motor Corporation instead.”

Tazmi’s headquarters and factory were located in western Japan. The corporation fell to bankruptcy after the oil crisis and underwent bank-led corporate restructuring, part of which saw it

become a subsidiary of an American manufacturer. It then committed more errors after the bubble burst, leading it to need even more support. Those errors were because they didn't realize what I'd said earlier: a company's idea of a good product doesn't necessarily align with what customers actually want.

"Won't the people complain that we're selling it off to foreign investors?"

"There will be fewer complaints than you'd receive for sinking money into a company that can't be saved. You're not really calling me about Ayukawa Motors, are you? You're calling because you're worried about the bank taking the hit from this two trillion yen debt."

This problem was a natural part of the bubble's aftermath. Failing banks caused public panic, and that kind of panic was directly linked to a loss of support for the ruling party—specifically, its current cabinet. Thus it was the job of the Financial Reconstruction Commission to, by almost any means necessary, make progress on Japan's bad debts and put laws in place to allow the investment of public funds to support its work. It tried to squeeze out the funds to cover bad debts from any bank that looked like it might end up under the Ministry of Finance's control—much like Keika Bank—either by merging or insisting on repayment.

"It's a real shame that you're so young. If you were an adult, I wouldn't hesitate to nominate you for a spot on the Financial Reconstruction Commission."

"Oh? I'm a child. My only job is to play. I'd appreciate it if you didn't use up too much of that precious playtime, by the way."

It seemed that Prime Minister Fuchigami was good at taking cues from someone's tone of voice.

"My apologies. We're the adults and this issue is our responsibility. However, I am also the prime minister. I bear the

weight of the entire country on my shoulders. I have a duty to produce the best outcome for our country, whatever it takes. I apologize for taking up your playtime with this phone call. But more than apologizing, I would like to ask for your *help*."

He was good at phone calls, it seemed—he made them pleasant affairs. At the very least, anybody would want to help him if he rang them up. I included myself in that.

I let out a sigh before listening to his request.

"It is likely that banks will start demanding repayment and be more reluctant to lend from now on. I want Keika Bank to handle all of it in accordance with the Keika Rules. We're mostly concerned with the subcontracts of small and medium companies."

These small and medium companies were hobbled by banks' reluctance to lend to them. While the sums they dealt with were small, the number of companies was anything but. In truth, what made many of those companies past saving was the fact that their managing directors didn't understand accounting.

Keika Bank had merged with a number of other financial institutions, leaving it with too many employees to keep on staff. Those excess employees *did* understand accounting, so we would need to start by sending them out to those companies to do some training while guaranteeing those companies' loans and the employees' salaries.

"Prime Minister, I would also like you to use public funds to speed up the resolution of these companies' bad debts. Where banks are reluctant to loan and demanding payment, Keika Bank will…" I trailed off, then affirmed my thoughts. "*I* will do something."

"I *am* sorry for using up your time like this. I promise I won't let your determination go to waste."

Prime Minister Fuchigami hung up. I put the receiver down and sat on the couch. Tachibana kindly brought me a glass of grape juice, which I gulped down in one shot.

“Are you sure about this, my lady?”

“You and Ichijou will be the ones doing all the work. I just need to prepare the funds to make sure you two work hard enough. That is going to be the most difficult part—or at least, it ought to be.”

Tachibana let out a dry laugh, which I decided to ignore.

A few months later, Ayukawa Motors would go on to become a subsidiary of a European car maker with the goal of managerial restructuring.

If money was blood, large companies would be the major organs and small-to-medium firms would be the capillaries. The reluctance of banks to lend money—coupled with their demands of repayment—stopped the blood flow to the capillaries to ensure the major organs survived. I was lucky that there was someone on my team who was educated in the countermeasures for such a situation. Said person was Ichijou, a man who had worked at a regional bank himself and knew well how to deal with smaller companies.

“There are several items you will need if you wish to save these small and medium companies.” Ichijou handed me several pamphlets. He’d come to see me to explain these countermeasures, bringing Katsura Naoyuki with him.

I glanced at Katsura Naoyuki. I was glad to see he was a much healthier color than when he had previously come to plead for my help. I decided to make some time for him to see my maid—his mother, Katsura Naomi-san—later.

I looked at one of the pamphlets. My heart pounded as I wondered what it was about to try to sell me. My eyes widened.

“A wall-mounted scheduling whiteboard?”

“That’s right. One with a two-month schedule, to be specific. In my experience, the majority of struggling automobile companies limit themselves by planning only one month in advance.”

Human decision-making was conscious and routine: it was usually supported by longstanding habits, but those habits could become unexpected pitfalls when it came to economic activity.

“It may be the fault of the limits of these calendar whiteboards. Most firms only write their plans for the next month either at the end of the previous month, or at the start of the month itself. Only then do they realize they have a payment due at the start of the month and rush off to the bank. It happens quiet often. By purchasing a two-month whiteboard, we can get rid of that issue immediately.”

With a calendar for a single month, you needed to erase the previous month’s schedule before you could write the next one. If you had important plans at the end of the month, you often couldn’t start writing next month’s schedule when you wanted to. However, with a two-month scheduling board, you could just move on to the next month and add those end-of-month plans in your schedule to the new calendar, making it much easier to manage your time.

“The first thing we’ll need to secure is time, the resource that puts the most pressure on small and medium companies. None of them will be able to recover without enough of it.”

Ichijou spoke from experience. As a twenty-first century woman, I had my own experiences, which led to my next question.

“Can’t we just use computer scheduling software?”

“I am positive that suggestion will be met with the assertion that there isn’t enough capital to spend on ‘toys,’ milady. I’ve heard the higher-ups have even done away with their abacuses.”

Katsura Naoyuki nodded his agreement. Perhaps this was a phenomenon common to all banks.

These directors may have been skilled, but the newfound stringency of banks had wiped them out. It was a perfect example of why even the most talented needed to adapt to their environments.

“So, whiteboards. We can convince the directors by telling them that whiteboard schedules are more economical than ripping away calendar pages. The schedule should be managed by the employees we send in so that the directors don’t have to pick up any slack. That will give us absolute control over the scheduling.”

My head spun as I tried to comprehend the generation gap. These whiteboards were just over ten thousand yen each. To send them to thousands of companies would put us close to an expected budget of a billion yen—if not over that.

Katsura Naoyuki then presented me with some bathroom cleaning tools. Seeing the plain confusion on my face, Ichijou smiled a little awkwardly.

“In my experience, firms in trouble often have unhygienic bathrooms. While they may still be cleaning the visitors’ bathrooms, you need only take one look at the employee bathrooms to know their condition. It is important to include employee morale and resources in any restructuring.”

“Morale and resources?” I echoed.

“A company’s resources may be so scant that they lack the ability to keep the bathrooms clean. Or it could be the other factor: the bathrooms may not get cleaned due to a lack of morale.
We won’t know which companies are affected by this phenomenon without visiting them, but a glance at the bathroom should tell us whether they’re lacking in one of those two areas. We should equip our employees with cleaning tools and task them with cleaning the bathrooms in the companies where they are stationed.”

Even as a set, these cleaning tools cost a few hundred yen each. Apparently, Ichijou took care of the bathroom's upkeep back when he worked for his regional bank and cleaned the bathroom of the executive suite even now in his current position. That inspired Katsura Naoyuki to do the same. Hearing that, I realized how lucky I was to have workers like them on my side.

"What's this last one?" I waved the final pamphlet, its page covered in pictures of candy, chocolate, rice crackers, and other snacks. On the other side it advertised tea and coffee sets.

"That's our weapon for companies with significant female activity. There are places where you will find that the managing directors' wives or girlfriends control the accounts. We will need snacks, tea, and such to make sure we get accurate figures from them."

A thousand yen refreshment set should last around a week. The cost would come out to around four thousand or five thousand yen a month. It probably would not be covered by expenses either.

I studied the stiff smile on Ichijou's face, wondering what sort of hellish working environments he must have been through. I was also forced to admit that such experience was what made him the star branch manager of a bank in Tokyo, regional or otherwise. The difference between skilled people and average people was that the skilled ones paid closer attention to details.

"All of that is my judgement and will be implemented accordingly. For the rest, I will need your approval," he said.

Ichijou signaled to Katsura Naoyuki, who handed me the next pamphlet. This pamphlet was easy enough even for me, a child, to understand. A 50cc scooter and a helmet set: that was how our workers were going to get around.

"Managing directors often put off anything to do with payments, both paying and accepting, because they're a lot of work.

Our employees are going in to help with accounting, so we can task them with this as well. Commercial districts may not have parking lots and often have roads too narrow for cars to pass down. In such cases, a moped is indispensable."

One moped was a hundred thousand yen, yet those thousands would come tally up to *hundreds* of millions. No wonder Ichijou wanted my approval.

Even so, a few hundred million yen was a paltry sum to me.

"As for the supervision of these companies, we will require computers. There is a chance that some of these companies will be beyond saving. Joining or merging them will strengthen their negotiation positions and improve cash flow. I ask that you set up business restructuring headquarters to carry out this work in several towns and equip them with computers. Even cheap computers will suffice. As long as they can run a spreadsheet program, that'll be enough."

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This was the time when computers were getting less expensive, cheap enough that you could buy them for just under a hundred thousand yen. The addition of computers would push our bill into the hundreds of billions, but the bad debts we were dealing with were in the *trillions*. Compared to that, hundreds of billions strangely felt like nothing at all. Ichijou's excellent presentation skills might have influenced my feelings.

"The final request relates to our aforementioned headquarters."

"You want to reorganize the Keika Bank headquarters we got from those mergers, since we don't really need it, correct?" I asked. "You're in charge of it, and Katsura is in charge of the practical work. Excellent thinking. No one will be able to complain."

The bank's head branch office already had a network associated with it, as it was the place where payment settlements were negotiated, making it a perfect option. It was ready to receive a complete makeover and make full use of the burgeoning IT industry.

Only a banker like Ichijou could carry out a project like that, and Hokkaido's powerful business base with ties to the former Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank was at the center. While the project was complex, as an alumnus of that bank, Katsura Naoyuki's work under Ichijou to reform the small and medium businesses made him the perfect ally. As well as getting my personal approval, Ichijou appealed to my authority as the majority shareholder, allowing him to bypass the board of directors. It was a genius move.

I pressed my seal to Ichijou's plan to reuse our redundant building without a care. With great gravity, Ichijou and Katsura bowed their heads.

Ichijou kept his expression serious as he said, "It will likely take six months to select our small and medium companies, and a number of years on top of that after our bailouts and rehabilitation to steer

them onto the right track. We need to hope that the economy will recover in the meantime."

I already knew what was to come: the economy would *not* recover. It was set to crumble completely. That was something we needed to defend against at all costs.

"Hoping is futile. The economy isn't going to recover by itself. *We* need to fix it." My voice was low and serious, completely unbefitting of a child my age.

Ichijou's expression was professional, but there was a hint of amusement in his voice as he replied, "As you wish, my lady."

The Imperial Business Federation: the control tower of Japan's economy, and the stronghold of the zaibatsu, the large, family-run business conglomerates that dominated the financial scene before the Pacific War and still held considerable power. Everything adopted into the agenda there moved onto the government. It was a form of lobbying for the business community.

"The accounting big bang reforms are frozen? I suppose that's only natural given the current state of things."

Less well known than the financial big bang reforms, the accounting reforms would be long blamed as a cause of Japan's stagnant economy. The reforms' centerpiece was a switch to current value accounting, something that would weigh heavily on the country's attempts to deal with its bad debts.

Japan's economy, at the present time, built up its strength through its use of unrealized profits. Bad debts originally referred to unrealized losses in the form of shares and land. If you bought shares at a million yen and they rose in value to two million, you could have an unrealized profit of a million yen. Likewise, if they fell to five hundred thousand yen, you would have an unrealized loss of five hundred thousand.

That was the standard way of thinking.

But the trouble came at the valuation stage. At the time, unrealized profits and losses were decided by book value: i.e., the value of something when it was purchased. Incidentally, America based these on market value, i.e., the value of an asset at the given time. That was fine if the value was on the upswing, but if it was trending down, you would constantly need to cover your losses—and that was why Japan's bad debts seemed never-ending after the change.

"Japan's economy is dying under its bad debts. What it needs is nourishment and medicine, and yet they're trying to starve it!"

That was a common criticism. One of the prime examples was the consumption tax increase which, coupled with the Ministry of Finance's scandals, led to the current organization—that is, the Ministry of Finance—becoming dysfunctional. That remained true even now.

"This could either make or break the zaibatsu, and it risks our cross holdings," Tachibana explained as I turned my attention back to the documents.

The kicker was that both the ruling and opposition parties recognized the shift from book-value accounting as a plan for economic stimulation—one that included the dissolution of the zaibatsu. If only book-value accounting could fix the economy and eliminate bad debts. Unfortunately, the panic that a revelation of credit uncertainty would cause might be strong enough to spell game over for the economy.

A sudden game over like that was not unprecedented. It had happened in 1997 to the Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank. The change to market-value accounting was aimed at investors and touted as a centerpiece of the open reforms to Japan's economic world, where zaibatsu stuck out like sore thumbs.

“The idea seems to be that the zaibatsu are unnecessary. How annoying.”

Unusually, Tachibana made a quip, though his expression remained serious. “Interesting you should say that, when society didn’t take too kindly to the buyout of Keika Bank nor the unexpected prosperity of the Keika Group.”

I guess that was the price we paid for avoiding disaster.

The Nikkei Stock Average was in the twenty thousand yen range, and while the Russian financial crisis and consumption-tax increase had damaged the Japanese economy, Prime Minister Fuchigami pulled together a budget for large-scale public works projects in an attempt to defend Japan from the worst of the damage. That budget would draw much attention; it was another way the party’s failure to capture a majority in the House of Councilors would be felt.

“Isn’t this just a bailout of the zaibatsu?”

“You sold off Keika Bank to the Keika Group! Now it’s prospering while everyone else is struggling!”

The Diet was in the midst of a self-perpetuating storm at the moment. The opposition was hounding the press, who in turn made a fuss, which served to instigate the opposition further.

Let us go back to where this all started: I’d received an invitation to a party hosted by the Imperial Business Federation. Kiyomaro-ojisama would attend the party, and he wanted me there as an accessory of sorts. It partly had to do with my posters for Teisei Department Stores and partly because my collaboration with the Teia International Philharmonic Orchestra put my name out there.

“If you’re unwilling, I think you would be within your rights to miss this one,” Tachibana said.

I shook my head slowly. “It’s all right. I’m used to acting as a party decoration.”

I had no way of knowing then how much my presence would cost.

The second we arrived at the hotel that would host the party, we were assaulted by a volley of camera flashes and media people shoving their microphones at the closed car door. Judging by their company badges, they were reporters from the weekly papers.

“You’re Keikain Runa-san, aren’t you? Please, will you talk to us?”

“Keikain-san, over here! Could we get a comment?”

“Our magazine would like to interview you about your modeling work!”

The guards quickly stepped in and tried to push the reporters away, but they used their numbers and the protection of their press privileges to take numerous photos of me. Tachibana instructed Sone-san, my driver, to head for the underground parking lot. I felt safe inside that car with them, but it was still scary to be hounded by the media.

“We’ve had the odd reporter show up for an interview with you since you advertised for Teisei Department Stores, but I turned them away. That is likely why there are so many of them here,” Tachibana explained as we took a roundabout route to the parking lot to avoid any reporters who may have been lying in wait. But that advertising campaign was last year. After so much time had passed, it didn’t explain why there were so many of them here.

“Those reporters are from the entertainment magazines, aren’t they, Tachibana?”

“It would appear so.”

“Why aren’t there any from the financial magazines here?”

I was at this party as a mascot, so I could understand the entertainment reporters. However, the party was thrown by the Imperial Business Federation—I expected some finance reporters to want to speak with me.

Unless they'd disappeared somewhere.

"Understood. Yes, Nakamaro-sama. Yes, certainly."

Tachibana's voice interrupted my musings. He spoke again before I could ask why he was speaking to Nakamaro-oniisama.

"Apologies, my lady. Nakamaro-sama has instructed me not to allow you to attend tonight's party after all. Due to the reporters shadowing us, we will also need to increase your guards as we leave."

I glanced at the side mirror to see several mopeds following us, their riders equipped with cameras. As I'd expected, there were more of them waiting when we got back to the estate. I learned why when the story was showcased on the news the next morning.

"A dark link has been found between Vice President Izumikawa and the Keika Group.

Doubts have been raised about the shadowy relationship between the burgeoning Keika Group zaibatsu and Vice President Izumikawa, who recently made a comeback in the Fellowship of Constitutional Government party.

The Keika Group openly supported Vice President Izumikawa's oldest son, Councilor Izumikawa Taichirou, in the recent House of Councilors election. In addition, Chairman Yanagitani of the Financial Reconstruction Commission shares a faction with Vice President Izumikawa. These connections have led to rumors that the auction of Keika Bank, formerly essentially nationalized, was not above board. More specifically, there are rumors of an under-the-table payoff. Dietman Izumikawa and the Keika Group's PR department unequivocally denied the rumors, but the opposition are pressing

further and are even considering subpoenaing the vice president himself. A disturbance within the House of Councilors is all but inevitable.

The ruling party is already struggling with this year's budget deliberations. Any more delays would mean delaying passing the budget itself, and so both parties are currently strategizing…"

Spring 1999 brought with it a significant event in the eyes of the political world: a series of unified local gubernatorial elections, starting with the Tokyo Metropolis. Currently, things weren't looking good for the ruling party.

"Keika Bank was sold off via an official auction by the Ministry of Finance."

"Then why was the Moonlight Fund the only participant in said auction? Might this fund be a shell company of Keika Bank? One which receives a lot of funding from that bank?"

"The Moonlight Fund has its headquarters on America's west coast."

"So why does the fund involve directors and executives from Keika Bank? And do you know who owns the fund?! It's Keikain Runa! A little girl who's still in elementary school! It's clear as day that the fund is just a shell corporation for the Keika Group!"

"The Keika Group have denied all knowledge on the subject."

"Well, what else are they supposed to say? Or do you think a mere grade-schooler is capable of leading the eight hundred billion yen takeover of a large bank?!"

How troublesome.

Yes, I was capable, but that was a fact nobody would believe. I was at the center of all of this, but I was also totally excluded from the conversation. I was treated as a tragic little girl whose name had been stolen for the "scheme," and the mass media was still sticking close to the estate. I switched off the TV and turned to Tachibana.

“I want you to look into those working within Keika Bank. We definitely have a traitor among us.”

Only a handful of people knew that I called the shots, but all of the bank’s executives were aware that the Moonlight Fund was in my name and could only be accessed by Tachibana and Ichijou. It was likely that one of those executives leaked this information in an attempt to dethrone the two of them. This was one of the downsides of heading a huge bank made up of patchwork parts.

“Ichijou. Are you able to select one of your men and send them in?”

Ichijou’s answer over the phone was instantaneous. “That’s impossible. Showing favoritism to those formerly of Far Eastern Bank will pique the jealousy of the other staff, and those under Katsura Naoyuki currently have their hands full with the small and medium businesses. It will do more to help our employees settle if we take on former politicians from the Ministry of Finance who have been cut off.”

I could only smile wryly at Ichijou for being so persuasive at a time like this—not that he could see me.

“I’ll leave that to you, Ichijou. You help out as well, Tachibana.”

“Very well. Incidentally, Nakamaro-sama said that he will be here to see you this afternoon.”

There were no prizes for guessing what he wanted to discuss. I let out a deep, deep sigh.

“I haven’t seen you in so long, Nakamaro-oniisama!”

“Runa. I’m sure you’ve heard a lot of things recently, but you mustn’t worry about any of them.”

There was some tension in the way we greeted one another. Trying to guess what the other was thinking would just make things even more awkward, so I went first.

"Where does the Keika Group stand right now?"

"We believe the most reasonable thing would be for you to relinquish the Moonlight Fund to us. But, given how much money is involved, I trust you have already moved your assets elsewhere."

Just in case, I'd hidden part of the profits from our resource business in one of the Akamatsu Corporation's shell companies. It wasn't hard to follow the trail if anyone went looking, but the Keika Group had expanded so quickly that not even the Keikain family itself fully understood what was happening. There was the building under construction in Kudanshita, which was set to become my castle, but the funds for that were funneled from the Moonlight Fund to various shell companies, making them practically impossible to trace. On top of that, the only two people involved in the Moonlight Fund were Ichijou and Tachibana, and they were unlikely to listen to anyone but me given the insane level of profits I helped the fund produce.

"I am thinking of leaving a little bit, as an allowance," I said.

I had no idea what the average allowance for a grade-schooler was at the time, but the amount hidden in Akamatsu Corporation's shell companies had expanded to three hundred billion yen. The actual amount in the Moonlight Fund was already over one trillion yen, with most of it set to pay back the special loan from the Bank of Japan that Keika Bank had received. If the Keikain family were to take that money away now, it would be a huge blow to the economic recovery.

"Anyway, Nakamaro-oniisama, when does everyone think this uproar will end? That's what I want to know."

Nakamaro-oniisama's response was straight to the point, a summation of the Keikain plan to bring this scandal to an end.

“The unified local elections. It will last no longer than the Tokyo gubernatorial election.”

Scandals were all about interest, and their progress was paradoxical. For example, resignations or election losses warranted more digging from the media, rather than a loss of interest. The media relied heavily on the “will of the people.” That was exactly why the House of Councilors, which currently had no majority, was still a problem. A censure in the House could be used to fell any councilor.

To say Prime Minister Fuchigami was in for a tough time managing his cabinet was an understatement.

“Are the opposition after Chairman Yanagitani?” I asked.

“I believe they are. I also believe that they aim to join with a fringe group in the ruling party to gain power. At the very least, neither Father nor I want the opposition to hold such power when one of their main policies is to dissolve the zaibatsu.” After a pause, Nakamaro-oniisama dropped a bombshell. “Keika Pharmaceuticals was approached with a merger proposal by Iwazaki Pharma.”

That could only mean one thing: a takeover of the Keika Group—and the absorption of the Keika Group by the Iwazaki Group.

“Is the merger going to go ahead?”

“It’s…difficult to say. Research expenses are rising sharply in the pharmaceuticals industry. It is undeniable that Keika Pharmaceuticals will struggle if it does not expand eventually. At the moment, it is only a mid-level company.” Nakamaro-oniisama held my gaze and spoke indifferently, but the whole thing sounded shady to me.

Perhaps a little late, I realized something. Nakamaro-oniisama, and likely Kiyomaro-ojisama, had seen through me.

“Another advantage lies in the fact that Keika Chemicals could unite with Iwazaki Chemical. It would be a merger with one of Japan’s largest and finest zaibatsu and is extremely unlikely to do us

any harm. It would also add the Keikain name to the list of Iwazaki shareholders. Assuming you don't intervene in any way."

"So then the problem is Keika Bank?"

"Keika Bank, the Teisei Department Stores Group, and the Akamatsu Corporation. Every zaibatsu is very eager to get their hands on those. They were likely under the impression that taking over the Keika Group would lead to Keika Bank falling in their laps—if not for the mysterious Moonlight Fund which they now understand stands in their way. That is why it is being looked into so openly. Although, I am sure no one expects *you* to be behind it."

The ban on bank holding companies was lifted by Prime Minister Fuchigami in an extraordinary Diet session last year. Since then, big banks had started preparing to establish such holding companies. Keika Bank was among them, of course. According to Ichijou's report, Keika Holdings would be established in the year 2000 if everything went to plan. The new holding companies would be overseen by the Financial Services Agency, due to open in the same year, and at the top of the FSA would be the chairman of the Financial Reconstruction Commission—a man who was currently in the midst of the scandal.

He must have had something to do with this.

Talking was exhausting, so I ordered Tachibana to fetch me some grape juice. Nakamaro-oniisama had coffee.

"What about the Moonlight Fund? Don't you want it?" I asked.

"I'd be lying if I said no. It's a fund with hundreds of billions, if not trillions, of yen. Yet I don't see it as a good option, largely because I don't want to get on your bad side. If nothing else, neither Father nor I have the courage to make enemies of Prime Minister Fuchigami and Vice President Izumikawa."

There was a hint of humor to his tone; I smiled. So, the instigators of the scandal were either the opposition fringe groups within the ruling party or those who wanted to see zaibatsu

dissolved. It was all being sponsored by some other large zaibatsu that didn't like the way the Iwazaki Group was going after Keika Bank.

Tachibana made use of the pause in the conversation to put our juice and coffee on the table.

"You can make use of it if you want. Just don't take *everything*."

"I already said I don't want to get on your bad side. We will make it clear that we are acting as your guardians. We'll need testimony from an unsworn witness to strike a deal with the House of Councilors. I'll sacrifice myself to give that testimony."

The grape juice spilled from my glass as I shot to my feet. "But then the public will see you as a criminal when you haven't done anything wrong!"

Nakamaro-oniisama watched with a smile as Tachibana inconspicuously wiped up the spill.

"Nevertheless, somebody must step up to the role, and you, Runa, are still a child. Allow me to do what a good brother should," he said.

The next day, it was announced that the Keikain Kiyomaro, head of the Keika Group, was the guardian of Keikain Runa, owner of the Moonlight Fund. It was also made known that, as she was a minor, his son was to give testimony to the House of Councilors on her behalf.

"Hey."

"Good morning, Keikain-san. You seem to be having a tough time at the moment."

"We don't care about what everyone's saying!"

I was greeted by three girls and their superficial assurances when I arrived at school that morning. They didn't push anything; it

wasn't as though any wrongdoing was proven. They probably avoided outright bullying because they thought that if they stayed on my good side, I might help bail out their families in the far-flung future.

The upper classes being who they were, it wasn't easy to suddenly drop their standard of living to that of the rest of society. While many of the companies and families continued as usual in public, under the surface, many were struggling because of their debts from the bubble. That was especially true for noble families with no businesses, who I knew gossiped behind my back while obviously trying to suck up to me. It was so obvious, I simply had to laugh.

"Thank you," I said. "I shan't forget your kindness."

I showed my false gratitude freely and openly. I suspected these were the kinds of people who followed Runa in the game world. No wonder there was nobody left to support her in the end.

"We're still friends, no matter what happens, Runa-chan!" Asuka-chan said.

Hotaru-chan silently nodded her agreement.

I was genuinely grateful for those two. They had probably explained things to the other three girls to get them on my side. Though I could see it being entirely Asuka-chan's idea, and Hotaru-chan just tagging along.

That aside, it wasn't such a bad idea to get more people on my team, given the future events of the game. I made a mental note to check those girls' circumstances later and ask Ichijou to come up with a bailout plan. When I did, that would begin my long relationships with Katsuki Shiori, Kurimori Shizuka, and Takahashi Akiko.

"Hey, Runa. I heard you were in trouble."

To hear Eiichi-kun speak like nothing had happened warmed my heart. In that moment, I was a tragic clown; my name had fallen to a mere commodity. Yet here he was, bringing up the situation without hesitation. I didn't know if it was fearlessness or something else.

"I am, yes. But I'm so lucky to know a gentleman like you who treats me just the same regardless."

"Quit it! You're embarrassing me." Hold on, that was a pretty cute reaction.

Before I could think of anything else to say, the classroom door swung open, filling the room with tension.

"Good morning, Keikain-san."

"Morning, Keikain."

Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun entered together. At a time like this, the best option was to beat them to the punch before they could say anything.

"Hey guys. You don't usually show up together."

Eiichi-kun cut in first before I could get my timing down. But the tension in the classroom visibly dropped when it was clear that, like Eiichi-kun, these two weren't planning on treating me any differently either.

"We don't. In fact, I was thinking of not coming in today, seeing as Keikain-san has been pulled into the recent scandal." Yuujirou-kun's smile wavered a little.

"See? Neither of them is acting any differently about it," Mitsuya-kun pointed out, elbowing Yuujirou-kun lightly in the ribs.

I tried to suppress the emotions welling up inside me. I smiled for them.

"Thank you, everyone."

“So, what exactly is going on?”

After school, we headed for the library. Mitsuya-kun’s question was directed to Yuujirou-kun and me. He was, of course, asking about the current rumors swirling around me. They’d especially caught Mitsuya-kun’s curiosity. He always did have an interest in more grown-up topics.

“There’s no doubt that the Public Prosecutors Office is continuing its inquiries, but since my brother’s election was completely legal, we shouldn’t have anything to worry about there. There’s no evidence of any payoffs or anything that would have won him the vote.”

The main accusation was that the Keika Group helped Councilor Izumikawa Taichirou win the election, and in return, the group won an advantage in the auction of Keika Bank. Yes, Tachibana and Ichijou had introduced Councilor Izumikawa to businesspeople in Hokkaido, but we’d already confirmed that those introductions and the ticket sales for our funding party didn’t fall foul of the Political Funds Control Act. Our involvement in the election, plus the Russian financial crisis meaning that the Moonlight Fund was the only attendee at Keika Bank’s auction, were the two factors that started the suspicions surrounding the Keika Group.

“It looks like the media and the opposition want to make this look like a huge corruption scandal linked to the recent trouble in the Ministry of Finance. Yet, while Chairman Yanagitani would be the perfect man to bribe for influence over the auction of Keika Bank, the Keika Group hasn’t given him a penny. That’s why they’re bringing up this nonsense about my brother’s election.”

“So because Chairman Yanagitani is in the same faction as your father, they’re claiming he gave the orders?” I asked.

“Even if that were true, wouldn’t it be odd that the chairman wasn’t bribed over the auction that he was in charge of? Anyone

wishing to bribe my father would bribe the chairman at the same time. The only person the Keika Group paid was my brother, and that was well within the law," Mitsuya-kun said.

Grade-schoolers had no right to talk about this kind of thing so seriously. I could feel a wry grin tugging at my lips, but then Eiichi-kun turned to me and asked outright:

"Runa. This means you're the one controlling the Moonlight Fund, right?"

"Well, yes, but how did you come to that conclusion?" I asked.

Eiichi-kun smirked, puffing out his chest slightly before explaining. He was proud that he'd put the pieces together.

"It's an elementary process of elimination, *Runa-kun*. If the Moonlight Fund was behind all of this, it would make sense. Because the fund is owned by you, a minor, everyone thinks it's some shell company and that the Keika Group's been bribing people. But we know that's not true. Plus, we saw you talking alone with Vice President Izumikawa on the day of the election results."

We'd gone together that day, so it made sense they'd seen me. Now that Eiichi-kun had tipped his hand, Yuujirou-kun sighed.

"Father spoke to me about you, Keikain-san. Though I wasn't sure whether to believe him."

"I have doubts, even now," Mitsuya-kun said, his eyes wide as he continued, "I mean, Keika Bank sold for *eight hundred billion yen*!"

I waved a dismissive hand, keeping a cheerful smile on my face. Of course, he was right to doubt that a grade-schooler would have access to that much money.

"I just got a little lucky on the stock market," I said.

"In which companies?"

"I've been investing in a certain American tech company."

All three of them fell silent. Said company was riding such a high at the moment that they instantly knew which one I meant. And by "investing," I actually meant selling at the right time.

"Now that you mention it, I've heard American engineers *love* our anime," Eichii-kun said.

"Do you mean *that one* series? I watched it because you had it on loan, Keikain-san. But seeing discussions about it on the internet is quite terrifying," Yuujirou-kun said.

"Don't you have another anime on loan right now?" Mitsuya-kun asked.

"I watched it too, 'cause Runa recommended it," Eiichi-kun cut in. "The bounty hunter protagonist is awesome!"

It happened right as the conversation changed track. Eiichi-kun's expression turned serious and he lowered his voice. "Hold on a sec. Looks like we've got ourselves an intruder," he said as he looked at his pager. He showed it to us. It was a simple code, but one that couldn't be easily understood at first glance, which made it a powerful weapon.

"Is it the media?" I asked.

"I'm pretty sure it is. Which means they've gotta be after Yuujirou or Runa."

This situation wasn't uncommon for children in the upper classes, and we'd been trained to escape should the media cause a situation. All four of us packed up our notebooks and stationery into our backpacks, ready to leave the library.

"I shall go ahead with Mitsuya-kun," said Yuujirou-kun. "Could you take care of Keikain-san, Eiichi-kun?"

"Got it."

"I've just checked. The coast is clear for the moment."

The three boys grasped our surroundings before I even knew what was happening. Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun left the library first, with Eiichi-kun and I not far behind.

The school had its own security staff, but any move against an opponent with press privileges would inevitably lag one step behind. Paparazzi were particularly poorly behaved, and their protections meant they didn't hold back. In a Japan where nobility and zaibatsu had survived to the modern day, they were prime targets for paparazzi.

"Run, Runa!" Eiichi-kun grabbed my hand and dashed, pulling me toward the stationed security guards. The paparazzi had found that area too and rushed for us.

My heart thumped, but not out of fear.

I was a villainess; my job was to dole out punishment as my wicked heart pleased. The press had caused a commotion inside the school, so I would not show them mercy anymore. Time to fight fire with fire and put a stop to the disturbance.

"Keikain-san! I'd like to talk to you!"

"Excuse me! Look this way!"

"Your thoughts on the recent allegations?"

At the entrance of the prime minister's official residence, a swam of reporters pointed their mics at my face. The bright flash of their cameras spiraled around me.

With Vice President Izumikawa's permission, I visited him officially as Hokkaido's Goodwill Ambassador of Agriculture. The prime minister would sample some of Hokkaido's delicious produce as part of a PR strategy. Reporters, as well as some of the employees at the residence, would sample cooking made from fresh Hokkaido ingredients. Only small samples, not bountiful portions, so we weren't breaking any laws.

We distributed coupons for fresh Hokkaido produce to TV stations, magazines, and other media sources, asking them to publish reports on the cuisine. On top of that, we had an enticing competition: those who filled out a survey and sent in a postcard would have the chance to win some coveted Hokkaido ingredients for themselves. That move boosted this event as both PR and advertisement; we'd be foolish to skip out on it.

"This food is delicious! You can taste the freshness!"

"That's right! Please, everyone, have as much as you'd like! I want you all to experience the flavor of Hokkaido!"

There were reporters who looked like they wanted to ask about the rumors, but I ignored them and carried on as ambassador. Thanks to the magic of editing, political questions didn't end up in the news. The event worked as a decoy, and it gave me a chance to speak face-to-face with Prime Minister Fuchigami, if only for fifteen minutes. I waited until cleanup, when the media had exited the room, to speak with him.

"Prime Minister. There's been a lot of commotion around me, and I would like to resolve it. May I?"

"In theory, yes. But how?"

The only people around us were residence staff, who ignored our conversation because I was a close associate of the prime minister. Prime Minister Fuchigami was still eating a bowl of Hokkaido seafood and rice, either because he didn't want to waste it or because he genuinely enjoyed it. It was clear that he was still viewed me through the eyes of a politician even while eating—talk about professional.

"It doesn't take a knife to silence a politician. All it takes is an electoral victory."

"That is perhaps the most difficult method you could choose. I'm still working hard to clean up after our losses in the previous

election.” The prime minister gulped down his warm green tea. He had seen through me immediately. If he were incapable of that much, he wouldn’t have survived in his post for long.

“Are we talking the unified local elections, or… No, the gubernatorial election?”

Capturing the governorship of Tokyo came with a huge advantage. The power of the role was simple enough: the governor was the representative of the capital city’s ten million residents, who either agreed or disagreed with the national political parties. Tokyo was also a world-leading financial capital, and with every media company in Japan having its headquarters there, it was a city rife with information. It was a huge loss that the ruling party had yielded the Tokyo governor position to an independent candidate and his backers.

“We take the city back from the current governor, that former celebrity with all the independents behind him. If we did, it would be enough to quiet the opposition and give us the advantage in those alliance negotiations going on behind the scenes.” I sipped at my green tea. Surely there was nothing more questionable than an elementary-schooler discussing the Tokyo gubernatorial election while blowing on her tea to cool it down. “But we won’t win this race by choosing an ex-bureaucrat.”

“Of course. Though there are so many choices I’m not sure who to bet on.”

One of the opposition members from the Lower House had already resigned from his position and stepped forward as a candidate for the next governor. The ruling party had a candidate in mind as well, but former Secretary-General Katou Kazuhiro, who had been touted as a candidate for the next prime minister, was also negotiating behind the scenes. He sought an alliance that would call for a replacement governor-candidate. Not only had that pushed the

former candidate to furiously double down on his candidacy, but the Tokyo chapter of the ruling party was now moving to back a political scientist. The whole party interior was a mess.

"Vice President Izumikawa has managed to hold back that one dietman," I said. "If you plead with him now, he should accept a withdrawal. Why not tell him that while the party won't officially authorize anything during the election, it will after his victory, hmm?"

Thankfully, the dietman in question was formerly from the Ministry of Finance and a member of the Izumikawa Faction, which was why such a drastic move might work. Moreso, he'd held a temporary position within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, giving him a connection to Prime Minister Fuchigami. The prime minister seemed to have foreseen that much, but my last words confused him.

"Your Little Majesty, are we not going to bet on the political scientist?"

"There's another step, which is why we're not acknowledging *this* candidate until after the results have been announced, making him seem dead in the water the whole while."

Prime Minister Fuchigami looked at me steadily and placed his teacup down. I did the same, although steam rose from my cup as I hadn't completely emptied its contents.

"All right," he said. "If you did so much preparation, then I will bet everything on you instead. I shall place all of my bargaining chips on the candidate of your choosing."

"Are you sure? You haven't even heard my decision."

"I am very sure."

I stared up at him in shock. How could I not? The prime minister glanced at the clock. The time for our meeting had come to an end, so we both stood up.

“Katou-kun has gone too far in his own direction. Win or lose, I’ll make him take responsibility for his actions.”

Those words reminded me that the former secretary-general belonged to a different faction from the prime minster. The candidate he’d backed would not run in the election, so there was no victory for him either way. If my candidate lost, we could blame it on him and the way he ran the election. If my candidate won, it would be a boon to the prime minister’s political track record and increase his power.

There truly was nothing to lose.

This man looked kind, but his declaration reminded me that he was a faction leader. I couldn’t help but be a little in awe of him.

“What business have you with me, Your Little Majesty?”

I spoke with Iwasawa Makoto-shi, literary master and former politician, in his study. By “literary master,” I refer to one of those rich people who devote themselves entirely to literature only because they were born wealthy and want for nothing in this world. When the House of Peers became the House of Councilors, proportional representation was introduced to the electoral districts, which paved the way for several famous literary names to become proper politicians.

Iwasawa-shi was a big-shot politician in the Fellowship of Constitutional Government, even making it as far as Minister of Transport, before he retired in 1995 and handed his supporter base over to his son.

“I’m acting as a messenger today. The party is apparently not going to back its bureaucratic candidate as previously planned.”

Iwasawa-shi said nothing; he simply observed me. Only after a thoughtful silence did he slowly open his mouth.

“I don’t know what you’re expecting, but I am retired. Leave.”

“We’re taking back the capital.” When dealing with a literary master, there was no need for logic or profit. What enticed them was a *narrative*—a captivating tale. “Now, wouldn’t that make a good slogan for this election?”

What I already knew, yet wasn’t going to mention, was that he planned to launch a huge election campaign involving the troupe of action stars that his younger brother used to manage. That troupe was the magic ingredient to transform the campaign into something larger than life and fantastical. That was the essence of “taking back the capital.”

Iwasawa-shi’s eyes gleamed with interest.

“There’s nothing more honest than a money trail. Who is borrowing how much, and what are they doing with it? I will simply pray for your every success. However, should you remember what I said, please do phone Prime Minister Fuchigami or Vice President Izumikawa after the election is over. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Wait. I’ll call them. I can’t leave it alone now that you’ve told me such an interesting tale. But I want something in return.”

Right, this man won the Akutagawa Prize. I suddenly had a bad feeling about this. Iwasawa-shi shot me a mischievous wink before continuing.

“I want *you*. If I showed my editor a character as interesting as you, he’d call her absurd and tell me to rewrite her. But it’s that absurdity that I crave with my very soul. You’ll help me, won’t you?”

Vice President Izumikawa, Prime Minister Fuchigami, and now Iwasawa-shi: what were these men expecting from a mere child?

“What kind of help do you want, exactly?”

“Nothing significant. I just want to write you into one of my books.”

It seemed I'd stirred his author's imagination more than I'd managed to appeal to his politics. Yet how could I refuse?

While the gubernatorial elections for Tokyo opened without an official candidate from the ruling party, it ended with a total victory for the final candidate to come forward: Iwasawa Makoto-shi. The next day, the Fellowship of Constitutional Government officially approved him as Tokyo's governor, cementing the success of its almost-sneaky election victory.

That victory brought all the clamor about the Keika Group scandal to an end, allowing the establishment of Keika Holdings to continue progressing smoothly.

More annoying was the action novel Governor Iwasawa wrote during the campaign, entitled "The Little Queen Takes Back the Capital." It ended up a massive bestseller, with plans announced for a movie adaptation. I was approached by a movie company for the lead role, but of course I refused the part, and I couldn't help wondering how this had happened.

A certain action production company had been asked by the governor to warn the media off, so they had stopped hounding me too. That was enough for me to convince myself of the phrase "all's well that ends well."

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GLOSSARY AND NOTES:

Geeks: One of the cliques in American schools. Generally, a highly technically minded bunch.

The anime they watched: *Serial Experiments Lain*

The operating system on sale: Microsoft Windows 98. This was when internet use started spreading widely. Older computers would fetch upwards of two hundred thousand yen, breaking the illusion that they were destined to depreciate in value.

Something which exceeds the limits of anime: The iPhone. The first generation was announced in January 2007.

Big Bang Accounting Reforms: In real life, it was the collapse of the Long-Term Credit Bank of Japan, which until then looked perfectly financially healthy, that triggered these reforms. Even this wasn't enough warning to prevent the collapses of Enron or Lehman Brothers Holdings Inc.

Censure in the House (of Councilors): In a twisted Diet, a censure is one way to remove a minister from their post. A minister removed in this way may no longer attend deliberations within the House, so in the majority of cases it leads to resignation or a cabinet reshuffle. It makes running a government much more difficult to do.

An Unsworn Witness: A witness called by the Diet to give their views as reference. Summoned more as a political show than anything else lately.

Bounty Hunter Anime: *Cowboy Bebop*, an anime aired on Wowow.

Pager: 1999 was when the PHS (Personal Handy-phone System) took off and marked the beginning of the end for pagers. At the time of this story, parents were still calling for PHS devices they could give to their children. Eiichi uses a pager that only transmits simple codes, as it is difficult for them to be read by others.

Paparazzi: Freelance cameramen who make a living snapping candid photos of celebrity scandals. Getting targeted by them can be scary, and in this world, they can be sent out like disposable pawns to get a juicy snapshot of a noble or someone connected to a

zaibatsu. Shaking them off can be tough. For a paparazzo to enter a school is, of course, illegal.

Bureaucratic Candidate: Someone who has worked a suitable amount of time as a bureaucrat. Resigning midway to run for governor means giving up that career. It is hard to say what counts as a suitable timeframe, but a common post to resign at is vice minister or director-general. Lately, younger candidates have also been successful, with several former section managers becoming governors.

Acknowledging a Candidate Post-Election: A wonderful system in which more than one candidate from a party can run, with the party only supporting the winner. It is often used by a certain ruling party in real life, even now. This may lead to a split vote, allowing a third party to come in and snatch victory.

Chapter 3:
The Party at Meguro's Wise Dragon King's Palace

THE WISE DRAGON KING'S PALACE in Meguro.

Its fancy name came from the fact that it sat on the site of a former temple. A traditional high-class restaurant, its name popped up now and then as the place where a certain bank hatched its shady accounting schemes—it was also involved in other scandals at the height of the bubble.

People loved this place and its extravagant, splendorous atmosphere, which was also why it was loved by politicians, financiers, and artists, from pre-war times all the way to the modern Heisei era.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"That's all right."

"We were early."

Prime Minister Fuchigami was the last to arrive, and he was greeted by Vice President Izumikawa and Governor Iwasawa.

One of the wonderful things about restaurants such as these was that they kept all secrets. Each of the three men had arrived at a different time and eaten in a separate room, and yet they were still able to meet secretly like this.

"I had pizza prepared as an appetizer. I thought I would try it cold, and you know what? It isn't too bad," Vice President Izumikawa said, holding the pizza up in one hand.

"The head chef here who takes the requests from the proprietress must have worked hard to get you that. Make sure you thank him afterward. Incidentally, that isn't pizza," Governor Iwasawa pointed out.

This restaurant served not only traditional Japanese meals, but Chinese too—the “pizza” was from the latter selection. In actuality, it was called *cōng yóu bǐng*, or a scallion pancake.

“Let us toast for now. We aren’t the sorts of people who can stay too long in a place like this.”

“I’m all for toasting, but to what?”

“To our Little Queen, of course!”

The three men clinked their glasses and gulped down their beers. It was just the answer Governor Iwasawa had wanted to hear. On his face was a mix of exasperation, amusement, and bewilderment.

“Is that small queen not working for one of you?” he asked.

“Of course not. We’re the ones being used.”

“That’s right. Looking at her reminds me very much of her grandfather.”

The image of her grandfather, a fixer who contributed to manufacturing at the end of the war and had great influence over the police and more dubious companies at the time, was enough to strike fear into the hearts of the three men. It was a habit of the Japanese not to take a person at face value, but to instead look at their past. When these men paid their respects, it was naturally less about the girl herself and more about her grandfather, who they knew well. Of course, their attention would inevitably turn back to her immediately afterward.

“You know, Katou-kun couldn’t have picked a worse time to mess up. I wonder if our little queen has turned her back on him…” Prime Minister Fuchigami sighed.

“She hasn’t,” Vice President Izumikawa assured him. “She’s still supporting the Yamagata Shinkansen financially. He just didn’t

expect her to make a move. His failure was in thinking she was a mere prop. I might have too, if I hadn't met her in person."

The former general-secretary had lost face in his failures during the gubernatorial elections, while the vice president gained popularity by backing Governor Iwasawa. Katou was a member of Izumikawa's faction, and it was well known that he was planning to seize control of the faction, using the excuse of seeking generational change. There were even rumors that he could become the next party leader, so his failure in the recent elections was set to cause significant repercussions within the party itself.

"Meaning that the eight hundred billion yen prepared for the buyout of Keika Bank…" Governor Iwasawa began, aghast.

"…Was sourced by the queen herself. I decided to stop thinking too hard about it once I'd established that much." Vice President Izumikawa's tone was dismissive, and he let out a dry laugh.

The conversation topic then shifted over to finance.

"We have set aside sixty trillion yen of public funding to tackle bad debts. The Diet is currently legislating for the lifting of the ban on bank holdings companies, and we'll now work toward merging a number of metropolitan banks. Keika Bank will be the establishment which encourages the bigger banks to merge," Prime Minister Fuchigami explained.

Governor Iwasawa cocked his head. If he was only here to show his face, why did this meeting need to happen behind closed doors?

"Did you call me because you needed something from me?" he asked.

"The girl was almost kidnapped once, though the incident was treated as a family matter and never made public. Losing her would be a heavy loss for our entire nation," Vice President Izumikawa explained, his expression grave. He just so happened to have been present at said incident. Tokyo's Metropolitan Police was under the

control of the governor. Organizationally speaking, the governor didn't have complete control over the force's police powers, but the sway he did have was too big to ignore.

"Are you asking me to assign her a guard?"

"To put it bluntly, yes. Yes I am," Vice President Izumikawa said. "The CIA have already been in contact with her."

"I'll have CIRO and the Public Safety Bureau make contact—indirectly—as well. The money she's playing with could be anything from eight hundred billion to sixty trillion. If the gentlemen who flourished along with the bubble were able to crawl out of their graves again, the country would go under for sure this time. I'm expecting a serious cleanup of Tokyo from you, Governor Iwasawa." Prime Minister Fuchigami gazed at the splendorous décor of the room, taking a bite of his scallion pancake. This was exactly why he'd chosen this particular restaurant as the meeting spot. It was beloved by artists of all kinds, least not writers, and had seen excessive amounts of money.

"Prime Minister, I know of someone suitable for the job. He's head of Japan's Cabinet Security Affairs Office, leads the riot police, and is a commander who's stood off against far-left extremists…"

"Ah, *him*. The former prime minister was interested in him too. If you can convince him to do it, I'll support your choice." The name Governor Iwasawa spoke brought a smile to Prime Minister Fuchigami's face.

He remembered the prime minister at the time speaking highly of that man back when Fuchigami himself was the Chief Cabinet Secretary. It was that very prime minister who had passed his faction over to Fuchigami. Doing a favor for that man would be like repaying his debt to the prime minister who had taught him so much. Said prime minister was a sociable man who was known for having few enemies, either in his own party or among the opposition. The man

Governor Iwasawa spoke of would be able to conduct crisis management as lieutenant governor and support Governor Iwasawa in his capacity as head of Japan's Cabinet Security Affairs Office.

The little queen would never know that she was being protected from the more dubious characters involved in the bad debt situation by the police, the Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office, and the Public Safety Bureau.

At the same time, there was another private meeting going on in the Palace between Tachibana Ryuuji, Ichijou Susumu, and Toudou Nagayoshi. The three men arrived at different times and took their meals in separate rooms before casually excusing themselves and meeting in the room they'd agreed upon.

Tachibana, who had reserved the room and organized the meeting, was the first to take his seat. He was followed by Toudou, who was used to such places and already making himself at home. It was said that most of Japanese politics was conducted at night, but this was Ichijou's first time working at such a late hour. He came last, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"This is like something from a novel or movie. It hasn't fully sunk in that I'm a part of it yet."

"You ought to get used to it," Toudou said. "You are the one who holds Her Ladyship's purse strings in your hand. This won't be the last time you are called to a place like this."

"I'm sure you are right. And tonight, we are among friends. Let us discuss work before we start drinking." Tachibana passed the documents beside him to Toudou and Ichijou. It was an overview of Her Ladyship's cashflow, known only to the three of them.

“The majority of Her Ladyship’s fortune has been built from her shares in an American IT company, and so is currently in US dollars. Currently, we have taken on Russian government bonds in exchange for oil, which we have been bringing into Japan and selling for Japanese yen. However, we do not yet have a domestic account in which to deposit said yen.”

Until now, Her Ladyship—that is, Keikain Runa—conducted her Japanese corporate acquisitions by borrowing yen from domestic financial institutions and repaying her debts in dollars. Despite the possible loss on the exchange rate, Runa was buying up debts that would otherwise be irrecoverable, and so the financial institutions allowed the risk.

However, with their new financial businesses in the forms of Keika Bank and Keika Holdings, and their other businesses such as the Akamatsu Corporation and the Teisei Department Stores Group it managed, these methods would become problematic.

The question at the heart of the matter was how to get the money Runa had made back into her central Moonlight Fund.

“How about depositing the money into the Keikain family account?” Toudou’s suggestion was phrased as a question, largely because he had a slight sense he already knew what the answer was. Tachibana proved him right.

“That account is not secure.”

The three men fell silent. Keikain Runa was once almost kidnapped. The fact that it was someone related to the Keikain family itself was the cause of the silence. Not even the girl’s own family was trustworthy.

“Regarding the bank, I suppose Her Ladyship wants to sit on it and do nothing unless it starts making a loss. She practically said as much when I went to see her,” Toudou murmured.

Ichijou spoke up next, sharing a similar experience. “It is likely that the ban on bank holdings company is about to be lifted by the Diet—probably because Her Ladyship didn’t take complete hold of the financial group that is to become Keika Holdings. Although it does mean that Keika Holdings will be able to stand up to the evils facing the metropolitan banks, securities firms, and the former members of the Ministry of Finance, so I suppose we cannot complain.”

“We can leave things be on that front for now. At the moment, a huge amount of profit is due to be deposited into Her Ladyship’s Keika Bank account via your Akamatsu Corporation, Toudou-san. At this rate, it is going to be difficult to protect those profits, hence why I called you both here today.” Tachibana’s tone was quiet, yet there was a grim edge to his words. He had seen hundreds of horribly dark things during his time as a fixer, and he had learned just how cruel and merciless humankind could be—because he himself was guilty of similar dark misdeeds.

Ichijou seemed to have figured out now why they had been summoned. “A trust bank. We’d been planning to merge with one eventually. I assume your intention is to make use of one for this situation?”

“Correct. I have already received Her Ladyship’s approval,” Tachibana said with a sigh. As far as Her Ladyship was concerned, anything that would make money was given the go-ahead, and she had shown no interest in learning about the inner workings of trust operations. All he’d needed to tell her was that he wanted to make a bank account to put her profits in, and she’d immediately agreed.

These three men had no way of knowing that Her Ladyship valued the few thousand yen in her wallet much more than the billion yen in her bankbook—to the extent that she found herself desperately making excuses to her maid, Saitou Keiko, who scolded her for spending too much on manga, novels, candy, and games.

“Would that not run the risk of the main family withdrawing Her Ladyship’s assets?” Toudou pointed out.

The Moonlight Fund was centered around a foreign private bank, and only Tachibana and Ichijou fully understood the fund’s workings, making it totally inaccessible to the other members of the Keikain family. The same could not be said for a domestic account. There was no guarantee that the profits likely to end up there from Keika Holdings and the Akamatsu Corporation would be safe from the wider family.

Tachibana gave a small nod. “Ichijou-san, you know how much money is set to be deposited into the new account, yes?”

“We are looking at easily fifty billion yen this year alone. The profits from the part of the Keika Group owned by the main family are projected at ten billion, which increases the risk of such things.” Ichijou flipped through the documents in his hand and pulled out a list of current trust banks. “There are currently three trust banks likely to come under Keika Holdings. They are Ichiyama Trust Bank, Long-Period Credit Trust Bank of Japan, and the Nihon Credit Trust Bank. They are to be brought together as the Keika Trust Bank. Is this where we shall set up Her Ladyship’s account?”

“Yes. At the same time, I would like us to consolidate who works for this trust bank. I have no intention of taking part in a proverbial game of musical chairs for the senior positions, and I doubt any of our executives are particularly interested in a subsidiary company so far down the chain.”

“In that case, I would like to nominate my subordinate, Katsura Naoyuki. His work in bailing out those small and medium companies is already underway, and there should be no issues leaving the rest to somebody else. I shall have him leave his position there to transfer to the new trust bank’s Sapporo branch, where he can manage Her Ladyship’s account. I shall leave the former Far Eastern account as is

and continue to make deposits into it. That should buy us some time before the main family notice the new account's existence."

Katsura Naoyuki was currently run off his feet in Hokkaido working to revitalize the small and medium companies there, but as per Ichijou's recommendation, he would go on to manage Keikain Runa's account at the newly merged Keika Trust Bank's private banking division.

Toudou interjected with slight hesitation. "May I say something? I understand this might sound a little unpalatable, but if we really cannot trust those around us, then isn't our only choice to bring in people from outside who are more loyal?"

"Is there anybody like that?" Ichijou questioned.

Keikain Runa did not belong to the main Keikain family. Keikain Nakamaro's position as the next head of house remained unchanged, which was why there was no one from the family, nor any closer associates, around Keikain Runa. There were no loyal personnel within the family; they simply had to come from outside.

After steeling himself, Toudou opened his mouth. "The power elite of Northern Japan. Or rather, the brainwashing factory that trained orphans to be spies."

"Are you talking about one of the darkest secrets of the Northern Japanese government? The Toyohara girls?"

Japan's general trading companies were also quasi-intelligence agencies. It was a business where networking was of huge importance, and the nation sucked up the vast amounts of information that came from those networks. That was part of the reason for unification with Northern Japan at the end of the Cold War. Toudou had made his name in the eastern oil markets and had some major connections not only in Russia, but in Communist China and the former Northern Japan.

Tachibana had been a witness to the aforementioned secret himself. “While Karafuto’s government was able to continue working post-unification with the support of the Japanese government and several zaibatsu led by the Iwazaki Group, the region’s marketization has triggered a rise in the unemployment rate and social unrest, which has not yet been dealt with completely. That makes me feel uneasy about asking these orphans to work for Her Ladyship.”

“The CIA already have their eye on Her Ladyship, don’t they? We don’t have much time to introduce new people to the inner workings of Her Ladyship’s conglomerate. The selection, training, and deployment likely won’t be complete until she is in junior high school. It may even be too late already, but it would be better than doing *nothing*.”

“This sounds very much like human trafficking, no matter how you spin it,” Ichijou said, hesitant.

Toudou was already prepared for that comment. “We cannot guarantee that Her Ladyship won’t be subject to another kidnapping attempt by somebody close to her. But outsiders will remain loyal to the contract, so long as we pay them. Considering the circumstances, I suggest we hire adults as well as children.”

“Might you mean retired soldiers from Northern Japan?”

“Correct. It isn’t that I don’t trust Her Ladyship, but frankly, the political situation in Russia is not good right now. While the deal to take on Russian bonds may result in massive profits for the Keika Group, it also gives the impression that Her Ladyship doesn’t care about the influence that deal has on the country’s population. The restoration of northern Karafuto means Japanese-Russians relations are stagnant, and when you think about Her Ladyship’s origins, it is certain that she is on track to be influenced by the Russians.”

Ichijou got to his feet. Toudou’s words were toeing the line of Ichijou’s loyalty and conscience.

“I shall pretend you didn’t say a word.”

After Ichijou had gone, Toudou stood up too. He murmured, as if to himself, keeping his eyes on the door Ichijou had left through.

“I’ll thank you for pretending. If you, Her Ladyship’s treasurer, is not kept pure, you are sure to corrupt her. Leave all the dirty work to Tachibana-san and me.”

“I agree with you, Toudou-san. I’ll permit you to put your plan into practice—but we keep it top secret.”

Once Toudou had left, Tachibana sat alone in the room, drinking. Suddenly the sliding door opened to reveal Vice President Izumikawa.

“My apologies. My earlier meeting went a bit long.”

“That’s quite all right. Our meeting would likely not be viewed favorably in any case.”

“This reminds me of being called out by Her Little Majesty’s grandfather when I was much younger. The messenger he sent is now throwing banquets of his own. It just goes to show how much older we’ve become.”

“And now the young bureaucrat from the Ministry of Finance he gave the message to is the vice president. How old we’ve become, indeed.”

While both men had consumed some alcohol, neither of them was drunk. Nor were they able to stay for too much longer, so they got right to the point.

“The prime minister has set aside sixty trillion yen of public funds to deal with the nation’s bad debts. He wants Keika Bank to set the precedent.”

“We are midway through the preparations for establishing Keika Holdings. May we pick who leads the organization?”

“Of course. The Ministry of Finance is undergoing some changes, and all financial governance of banks and securities firms is being passed on to the FSA. You need not pay attention to the former seniors from the Ministry of Finance who have their eyes on the job—at the very least, I won’t let them complain.”

“In that case, I would like to nominate Ichijou Susumu for the top position at Keika Holdings.”

“Understood. I’ll inform the prime minister.”

Vice President Izumikawa left, closing the sliding door behind him. Tachibana waited a while before leaving the establishment himself.

When he made it home, Her Ladyship had come to greet him at the entranceway in her pajamas.

“You’re home late, Tachibana. Where were you?”

“I ate out. It’s been a long time since I’ve enjoyed such wonderful food and sake.”

“You mean you went socializing with adults. I appreciate your work, you know. Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“You don’t need to worry about that, my lady. Now, come! It’s about time you went to bed.”

“There you go, treating me like a kid again! I’m already in elementary school. I can stay up late if I want to…” Her remark was punctuated with a yawn.

“If only I could believe your words. Unfortunately, your eyelids are drooping.”

“I know, I know. Goodnight, Tachibana.”

“Goodnight, my lady.”

Tachibana made no mention of the bank account; Keikain Runa remained completely unaware.

It would remain that way even after Keika Holdings and the account at Keika Trust Bank were established, and the account filled with tens of billions of yen.

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GLOSSARY AND NOTES

The Wise Dragon King's Palace in Meguro: Based on the Meguro Gajoen, which gave inspiration for the bathhouse in the animated movie *Spirited Away.*

"A certain bank hatched its shady accounting scheme": Something extravagant, complicated, and mysterious involving gentlemen and less-than-savory organizations during the time of the bubble. The scheme was so tremendous that the restaurant earned the nickname "the Demon of Gyoninzaka."

Pizza: *Cold* pizza. Hearing the pizza was cold inspired him to order some warm for the reporters waiting outside.

Head of Japan's Cabinet Security Affairs Office: A descendant of a Sengoku military commander, he led the police force during the Yasuda Auditorium and Asama-Sansou incidents.

The Former Prime Minister: The Keiseikai Faction's founder and first leader. Apparently, before he overthrew his seniors and formed the faction, everyone called his boss "Father."

Trust Bank: A bank capable of effectively managing the assets of businesses and individuals. The assets are supposed to be protected in case of bankruptcy, but in practice this apparently doesn't work too well.

Power Elite: A concept proposed by American sociologist, Charles Wright Mills. In this case, it refers to members of the

dominant stratum of society: managers of large companies, senior military leaders, and senior politicians.

Chapter 4:
A Lady's Everyday Life:
Fall 1998-Summer 1999

"On your marks. Get set…!"

I was off the second the pistol's shot rang out. I was a grade-schooler, and as such, I took part in your typical school events. It was now fall—the season of the culture festival and field day.

"She's so fast! Keikain-san takes first place!"

This was also a time when we, the Gakushuukan Quartet, stood out. I waved at everyone on my team as I returned to my seat. My events were the hundred-meter sprint, the girls' obstacle race, and the girls' team relay, where I was the final runner.

"Nice one, Runa!"

"You really are quick, Keikain-san."

"Yet our team isn't doing that well. Nobody seems that motivated."

Mitsuya-kun was right. Most of the kids here belonged to elite families and had secure futures ahead of them. A simple race wasn't enough to get any of them fired up. The majority of participants were hardly pushing themselves, like they were doing it all out of obligation.

"What can we do to get them excited, then?" I asked while wiping my sweat away with a towel, not expecting a serious answer. Yuujirou-kun gave me one anyway.

"We ought to show them something moving. Once a hero steps forward, the soldiers will follow and become heroes themselves."

"Sounds like a job for me."

"That's not up to you to decide, Teia. *I'm* doing it, so you stay out of it."

“What did you say?!”

I couldn’t help but giggle. The three boys looked at me questioningly, and I winked. “There’s a track right there. Why not race for the honor?”

“There he goes! Teia-kun takes first place by a huge margin!”

“Second place is running so hard, but he can’t even get close! Izumikawa-kun takes victory, leaving everyone else in the dust!”

“What a fierce fight! But Gotou-kun is the winner!”

All three of them took first place in their events. I shouldn’t have been surprised.

Field day offered various events, with each child choosing a few to participate in. The Gakushuukan Quartet was our class’s strongest contenders, so we picked our events strategically to get the most points. However, the nature of field day meant that alone wasn’t enough to win. Team sports and relays required more strategy to rack up points. The Quartet’s participation made for a more exciting event, but that also inspired other classes to strategize *against* us.

“Jeez…” I gazed at the scoreboard, wiping the sweat from my brow with a towel. It was a closer fight than I’d expected, and we were losing.

“It looks as though they’re taking advantage of our conspicuousness and focusing their top athletes at the events we’re *not* taking part in. You can especially see the difference in the hundred-meter race, which everyone participates in,” Yuujirou-kun said, pointing out where the gap between our abilities and those of the other students was largest and most obvious. We’d lost points by recklessly thinking we four had earned plenty, and that the other members of our class would do enough to snatch victory. Ours was the class with the top four students in the year, meaning most of the rest of our classmates didn’t feel the need to go all out, and also that

the other classes were wary of us. All of that was reflected on the scoreboard.

"Izumikawa, Keikain—we've got a problem. One of the girls hurt her foot in her event just now."

Mitsuya-kun's report had Yuujirou-kun and me switching to Class Committee mode. We gave each other a nod and launched into action.

"Okay. Keikain-san, can you team up with a member of the health committee to take her to the nurse? I'll register a replacement athlete with the field day committee."

"Got it. Hey! Can I get someone from the health committee over here?"

I took the girl to see the nurse. When I left, Yuujirou-kun was waiting at the door. I closed the door behind me, telling the girl from the health committee to go on ahead.

"How is she?" Yuujirou-kun asked.

"She's got a minor sprain. She's been told to rest for a few days, so she can't compete in any more events today."

Yuujirou-kun put a hand to his cheek. While not necessarily desirable, there was an opportunity hidden in his next words. "There's a problem. One of the other boys in our class is sick with a cold, remember? With this sprain, we're two people short—specifically the two people who were entered in the three-legged race. Their partners can team up with each other. That's not a problem, but now we're a whole pair short, and they've asked us to enter a pair of substitutes."

Since the three-legged race was entered in pairs, there were a lot of points up for grabs. Without a fill-in pair for the one we'd lost, we'd have a hard time turning the tide of the day even if we did well in the final relay. It was a peculiar problem for those like us, who were exceptionally smart but also hated to lose.

“Gotou-kun and I have the boys’ obstacle relay after this, so we can’t compete in the three-legged race. But you and Eiichi-kun both have plenty of time until your next events.”

“Are you saying we should compete? I don’t mind doing so, but don’t you think it would be better if we teamed up individually with the kids who’ve lost their partners?”

We would gain more points aiming for second and third with those partners than the first place we could win together.

Yuujirou-kun averted his gaze and mumbled, somewhat hesitantly, “Eiichi-kun said he wanted to run with you.”

I felt my face stretch into an inexplicable smile. Eiichi-kun’s leg would be tied to mine with a headband. The three-legged race was all about creating a rhythm with your partner and sticking with it.

“We’re gonna win,” he murmured.

“I know.”

“Stick with me, Runa.” There was something captivating about Eiichi-kun’s expression as he stared out toward the finish line.

“Sure. Just make sure *you* stick with me, Eiichi-kun.” My heart was thumping so hard I felt that it would explode. I silently told myself I was just pumped for the competition.

We were off the second the pistol fired—falling face-first into the ground.

“You guys were the worst pair I’ve ever seen. That was a prime example of what happens when two partners are both in it for themselves. You really should’ve seen that coming…”

We couldn’t say anything in the face of Mitsuya-kun’s analysis afterward.

He was absolutely right.

“What are you doing here, Mister Photographer?”

Smiling was fundamentally a form of attack, but its weakness showed when up against people who weren’t aware of that fact. Those people were unaffected.

People like this photographer.

He threw a box my way, and I opened it up to find a pair of shoes.

“I got some sneakers for work, but I don’t have any good models. I came over here once I heard it was field day!”

Where did this guy get his information? Was he even *allowed* in here?

“I am not *modeling* for you,” I said.

“You need to look more fired up than that to sell these! You can have them. Just run with those, and I’ll take all the shots I need.”

He was not listening to me at all. Artists sure were a pain to deal with. I doubted I could convince him to leave me alone, so I accepted his proposal with a sigh before taking the opportunity to ask one more thing. “What do you think I can do to motivate my unmotivated classmates?”

He winked at me, his answer coming smoothly. “It’s simple. Let me photograph you, and I’ll have them all fired up for next year!”

“It’s time for the final event: the girls’ team relay! If you could all take your positions—ah! One of the girls has fallen at the starting line, giving her team a late start!”

It was a girl from my team, and now we were far, far behind. Considering how unmotivated my team was, I wouldn’t be surprised if everyone gave up and just accepted that we would be last. The

total scores meant today's winning team was already decided, so it wasn't like it would make a difference.

"Don't give up, Runa! If anyone can win, it's you!"

That cheer ignited my motivation. He was such an idiot. Couldn't he see the massive gap between me and the others?

"Run! You just need to get the team a better time! Just three seconds! You can save the team, Keikain-san!"

It was nice of Yuujirou-kun to be so specific in his instructions. How many times had that technical sweet talk of his won me over?

"Believe in yourself, Keikain! You're not the type to let others pull ahead!"

I clapped my hands together in realization. Mitsuya-kun was completely right. I was born a villainess. I would lose to the protagonist—but nobody else. I glanced at the photographer. He had his camera at the ready and a big, stupid grin on his face.

"I guess I'll pull my team out of danger the way a villainess should—though I hate to give that photographer more to smile about." I folded my arms, rolled my shoulders, and began to hop in place. The other final runners set off around me one after the other, leaving me behind. Sound began to fade from the world around me; I took the baton from the runner who came up to me and dashed off.

My legs were fast, powerful, and light as the wind.

"She's caught up! Keikain-san has caught up right before the goal! And she's done it! She pulled her team right out of last place into first!"

I waved at my cheering classmates. I avoided the gazes of the three boys who I spotted grinning smugly like they knew this would happen. Naturally, the three of them achieved an overwhelming victory for their own team in the boys' relay.

“You sure are sneaky, Runa. I didn’t know you were getting shot for a poster during field day.”

“I wanted *nothing* to do with it! The photographer just showed up at the event!”

“You made those sneakers exclusive to the Teisei Department Stores Group though, right Keikain-san? They even made it into the news because they keep selling out.”

“I had to do that, or else there was no point!”

“I would wager that photographer will come back, seeing as you’ve brought him so much success.”

“Please don’t say that or I’m going to believe you…”

As we chatted, we passed a poster of me stuck up on one of Teisei Department Stores’ convenience stores. There was a feeling of defeat in seeing that he had skillfully captured me, with a serious look on my face, right at the moment I passed the other runners. I laughed to myself, a little bitterly, as I realized this might not be my last gig as a model.

As elementary school students, we weren’t expected to manage stalls for the culture festival. Instead, we were to make an exhibition. That in itself wasn’t a problem, but it did give rise to a dispute as old as time: our exhibition’s *theme*.

“Can’t we just put up pictures we’ve drawn around the classroom?”

Imperial Gakushuukan Academy was an elite school whose main selling point was its combination of every school level, from elementary to college. The existence of this school showed that the idea that regional imperial colleges were opened mainly for talented locals was somewhat of a myth—big-shot politicians who didn’t go to those imperial colleges claimed it was because that was where the

bureaucrats went. Which begged the question: what was Mitsuya-kun doing *here* of all places?

"My family has produced several generations of bureaucrats and two administrative vice ministers—and when you get to administrative vice minister, you're conferred a first-generation baronage. Imperial colleges are for those who think highly of themselves."

That made sense. Mitsuya-kun's father was set to become administrative vice minister too, making him the third baron in the family. That was enough to call them proper nobility. This school was host to a lot of bureaucratic nobility like that. But I digress.

"Why don't we take the chance to do something a little more exciting?" As usual, Eiichi-kun was the one to get things moving, while Yuujirou-kun and I were there to back him up with the hard work. Then, whenever we met a dead-end, Mitsuya-kun would offer a cunning solution. Teamwork is always a good thing, no matter what form it takes. I hope.

"'Exciting' meaning *what*, exactly?"

Eiichi-kun just tilted his head at me without answering. Yuujirou-kun stepped up to the blackboard and started to make a list of "exciting" things. We were actually in a middle of a class meeting at that moment. Incidentally, Yuujirou-kun was class president, and I was his vice president.

"Since we're at the elementary level, we can't do anything that involves food or drink. That leaves something like a play, or maybe a musical performance. Technically we're allowed to use the gymnasium, but since all the years above us use it too, it's rare for the elementary classes to get a chance. So a performance might be tricky to pull off."

"Hold on. I believe we can use the courtyard if we submit an application to the festival committee. As long as we keep things low-

key, we should be able to do something that *looks* impressive that way."

See? What did I say about Mitsuya-kun pitching in? I was thrilled to have him here. Now our problems were reduced to one.

"A play or a musical performance, then. Which do we want to do?"

Our class was somewhat unique in that it was full of children from esteemed families, meaning many of us had musical skills. A musical performance shouldn't be too hard to pull off.

I caught Eiichi-kun grinning at me. I knew what that grin meant. He had an idea—one I was bound to dislike.

"Let's put on an opera. You'll sing, right, Runa?"

I sighed. "Please explain to the class how you came up with that idea."

I had a vague sense that it had to do with the recent concert, but regardless, the responsibility he was trying to place on my shoulders right now was huge. I tried to come up with some sort of counterargument, but Eiichi-kun's opinions tended to outweigh ours a little.

"Me and Runa went to a concert by the Teia International Philharmonic Orchestra recently, and they said they wanted to collaborate with you again." Eiichi-kun ignored the screams that came from the girls in class. They didn't get too involved in our affairs once we'd formed our little quartet, but something this big was bound to pique their interest. I tried to think of some way to respond, but Eiichi-kun didn't let me. "Our orchestra is putting on a charity concert for the culture festival, so we can make use of the free musicians. All we'd need to do is some acting for the drama bits."

"That puts an awful lot of pressure on Keikain-san, Eiichi-kun."

Thank you so very much, Yuujirou-kun.

I hoped that would be enough to dissuade Eiichi-kun, but it seemed he already had a card up his sleeve.

"You sure about that? The orchestra told me she couldn't turn them down—not if I showed her this." Eiichi-kun got to his feet with some sheet music in his hand. His steps were determined as he approached the teacher's desk and slammed it down on the table.

Seeing what it was, I sighed. But then I gave my consent.

"Be sure to submit all your proposal documents to the festival committee!"

"If you're planning a haunted house, be sure to include the route, position of each feature, and names of those at each station."

"This is the broadcasting committee. A meeting to discuss the rules for use of the PA system during the festival will be held in the meeting room in the high school building."

"This is the festival committee, for the ceremony committee. The meeting with our guest associations had been moved to 5:00 p.m."

"The disciplinary committee has said we can't let any work for the festival run past 7:00 p.m."

Culture festivals were nothing without the preparation that went into them. Yuujirou-kun and I walked through the clamor with smiles on our faces. We'd just finished handing in our proposals to the festival committee.

"The preparations for the festival appear to get much more intense once you reach the junior high school level."

"Yes. We'll probably end up making just as much fuss when we get there," I remarked as we passed a boisterous café called

"*The Scarlet Sun and the Black Crucifix*." This was just how I wanted to spend my youth, but a part of me felt disconnected from it.

"It does get exhausting running around like this all the time, since Eiichi-kun seems to revel in putting on a show."

We had submitted a form to use the courtyard in the end. I sighed, spotting a sign which boasted a gaming corner: Catan.

"He claims he's being considerate. I'd rather he wasn't."

"You mean this is all *too* special?"

I didn't know how to respond, so I smiled awkwardly. The charity concert put on by the Teia Group's philharmonic orchestra was "specially" chosen, or at least that was how it was officially described. The program was pieces taken from *La Traviata*, and I was to feature in *Libiamo ne'lieti calici*, a drinking song featured in the opera. I was singing as a background character, but I was still happy to be able to sing with some of this century's most talented opera singers. As we walked past the "beach hut," which was due to offer simple ramen at a 30 percent discount, I waved the sheet music I had with me through the air. The story of *La Traviata* wasn't exactly feel-good, but that was pretty typical for operas written in that era.

"I'm not *unhappy* to take part, but I wonder if Eiichi-kun knows my life isn't set to follow this kind of path."

I was all in favor of the way the protagonist of the opera chose to live her life, but at the time the opera came out, it was *highly* controversial. Said protagonist, Violetta Valéry, was a high-class prostitute, and Eiichi-kun probably thought he was being sensitive by not suggesting me for the role…only to have me end up playing one of her patrons instead. Translated, the opera's title was "*The Fallen Woman*."

I wasn't sure what to make of that.

"Either way, it's lovely to have such talented voices performing at our festival." I was mumbling mostly to convince myself, but

Yuujirou-kun must have overheard, because I noticed him smile. When I got older, I would inevitably reach a point where I was forced to use people. Plus, the world wasn't such a wonderful place that I could pursue my passions to their full extent while holding down a job. We passed under the banner advertising the photography club's exhibition: *The Power of Backlighting*.

"I'm actually jealous, you know? You have a talent you've actually mastered."

"You think so? I just feel guilty, like I'm cheating somehow."

That was because I *was*. That was where the guilt came from.

Not that I was going to share that with Yuujirou-kun.

We kept walking, right past *Shanghai*, a makeshift Chinese restaurant.

"You, Eiichi-kun, and Gotou-kun all have natural talents. Meanwhile, all I can do is work hard. But all the work in the world isn't enough to compare to a full-fledged, natural talent. Isn't life unfair?"

Game-wise, Eiichi-kun was the main protagonist, and therefore good at everything. Yuujirou-kun might not have been as talented, but he was more amicable and mature. Incidentally, Mitsuya-kun wasn't as amicable, but he was smarter and more athletic than Eiichi-kun—and when you broke through his cold exterior, he could be incredibly sweet.

"There are things way more unfair than that in life," I murmured. Yuujirou-kun cocked his head in confusion, and I let out a dry laugh—though not one without amusement. "Life is all about luck."

"Yes, you're right…"

We eventually made it back to our own classroom. Seeing all our classmates dressed up for the opera (their costumes were mostly homemade), Yuujirou-kun and I exchanged a smile.

“Hello, you two. We’re just about finished here,” Mitsuya-kun said.

“What are you two smiling about?” Eiichi-kun asked.

I let out an innocent giggle. “That’s between Yuujirou-kun and me.”

My voice rang out through the courtyard. It made passersby stop in their tracks, and even the classmates performing with me stare in shock. It was Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*—more specifically, the exceedingly famous “Queen of the Night” aria. The orchestra at the earlier concert must have picked up on my talent and love of music. This song was often considered a gateway to success for coloratura sopranos, and in Japan it was known more widely as the “Queen of the Night” aria than its proper title, “Hell’s Vengeance Boils in My Heart.”

The orchestra was supposed to be backing my performance in this song—but they weren’t supposed to make it the main attraction over the rest of the program!

I suddenly spotted Ichijou. He had mentioned he had work with the family today and would bring them here afterward. And there was Nakamaro-oniisama, standing right next to Tachibana! I thought I’d kept this a secret! But there they all were, *smiling* at me.

I sang even harder.

Those three minutes might as well have lasted three hours, but when they finally came to an end, I was greeted with rapturous applause. It didn’t just come from Eiichi-kun, Yuujirou-kun, and Mitsuya-kun, but from Tachibana, Ichijou, and Nakamaro-oniisama

too. The applause itself was spectacular, and the admiration from these people, who *knew* me, made me giddy with joy.

The conductor approached me and whispered in my ear. “This applause is the praise you should have received at the previous concert.”

An unfamiliar emotion swept over me, and I began to cry there in my dress.

I’d long since forgotten what praise was like in my previous life.

“An entertainment group?”

“Yes. They would like you to become a patron.”

Fall was the best season for enjoying the arts. Since becoming more well-known, I’d had my fair share of performers asking me to become a patron. The majority of them were refused before they made it to me personally, but this time Tachibana had come to me with a specific troupe’s request.

“As part of its ongoing culture strategy, the Teisei Department Stores Group acquired a theater. Originally, it was being rented out to any troupe which wished to use it, but due to the recent poor economic conditions and troupes disbanding one after the other, it was decided that they should acquire an entertainment group of their own. That will be a good strategy for attracting customers as well.”

As a group primarily focused on department stores, they could have the best management strategies in the world, but no customers meant no business. That was why the stores were placed in front of stations, where foot traffic was high, and had theaters, halls, and restaurants on their upper floors, to make customers traverse the whole place to get to them.

There were examples of department stores that failed to secure parking lots and crumbled the moment automobiles became popular in society, but even now, no one could deny the strategic power of having your store outside a station in a major city. While our unprofitable stores continued to close, we were aggressively developing those that still had the power to attract customers by constructing multi-story parking lots in the surrounding areas. Employees from the failing stores were being moved to our supermarkets and convenience stores—we were trying to maintain the employment of as many workers as we could—but to afford it, our only option was to increase sales.

"You seem particularly keen on theater troupes from Hokkaido, my lady. Truth be told, acquiring a relatively famous group like that may not be such a bad idea for you."

Plus, one of the actors from those troupes appeared on a regional TV show and never failed to make me burst into laughter during the cooking segments with the show's yellow mascot. They cooked summer vegetables, fried up meals, and baked pies together. Tachibana came with a proposal to have the group appear on late-night shows (primetime television), so he must have known I'd be more than happy to become a named sponsor.

"Who is this group exactly?"

"The KDK Imperial Opera Company."

They were a subsidiary of Kansai Dentetsu Railway Co., a company which held lines in Osaka. KDK stood for *Kansai Dentetsu Kagekidan* (the Kansai Electric Railway Opera Company). The Kansai Dentetsu Railway Co. found its forays into the leisure industry going deep in the red after the bubble burst, and it had already been decided that its opera company would be disbanded as part of its cuts. The company's members and supporters had been working to prevent that.

“It sounds good,” I agreed, “but considering Dentetsu is willing to let it go, it also sounds like a rather expensive investment.”

“Kansai has several major opera companies. It must have been difficult for them to break into that market. However, as a sponsor, you will have potential connections via the Moonlight Fund, even as far as Hollywood. Not only could this serve as positive promotion, but it will also be a good way to break into the performing arts industry,” Tachibana explained matter-of-factly. I knew that tone of his.

He was hiding something.

“And what do you *really* think, Tachibana?”

“That it would be good to have connections within the performing arts for the sake of your protection, my lady.”

The connections between the performing arts and the underbelly of society ran deep. Investing in connections within that industry might be a good way to protect myself.

“You seem rather cautious.”

“There are some large-scale mergers going on between metropolitan banks. You are at the center of that maelstrom. There is no such thing as being overly cautious.”

The recently announced merger between DK Bank, Fuyou Bank, and the Commercial Bank of Japan was the pistol announcing the start of the race for survival within the banking industry, which had been plagued with criticism for overbanking and lagging behind in dealing with its bad debts.

After the shock of the three-way merger, two large pre-war zaibatsu announced a merger between their banks, Futaki Bank and Yodoyabashi Bank. This triggered a stream of more merger announcements, for example, between Owari Nagoya Bank and Yamanaka Bank, and between Asahi Bank and Osaka Nomura Bank.

This wave of major mergers was a sign of the endgame for the industry's bad debts.

These announcements were welcomed by political and business circles, but their attention was also focused on Keika Bank, which was likely to be involved in mergers itself. Any establishment that dared seize the initiative by swallowing up Keika Bank had to be strong enough to do so, else it would simply be swallowed up by someone else.

With its debts sent to the Resolution and Collection Corporation, the Keika Bank I'd bought was now a first-rate institution comprised of three former metropolitan banks: Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank, the Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan, and the Nihon Credit Bank, plus Ichiyama Securities. If the result of the three-way merger had put its hat into the ring for the Keika Bank auction, it may well have won.

We organized a briefing session with Ichijou over the phone.

"If I recall correctly, Fuyou Bank is a combination of several zaibatsu starting with the Fuyou Group, yes?" Tachibana murmured.

"Indeed. Meanwhile, DK Bank is comprised of several zaibatsu, including the Yamamizu Group," Ichijou added.

"And I suppose I don't need to explain the Imperial Iwazaki Bank? The Keika Group is still somewhat mid-sized. We have several other groups eyeing us for a takeover," I said lightly.

The banks' race for survival could not be won without the elimination of bad debts. That meant reluctance to loan and demands for repayment from large institutions, meaning we would see wide-scale bankruptcy soon.

"Together, those three banks will be a real powerhouse."

"The resulting institution will become the top lender for a range of businesses. Their bad debts won't be a problem for much longer."

In general, Japan's banks were on equal footing when it came to lending. If a given company wanted to borrow ten billion yen, you would have metropolitan banks A, B, and C lend it three billion each, and have the final billion come from some other bank or organization. The three-way merger had combined those banks A, B, and C, so now you would have one institution boasting a massive outstanding loan of nine billion yen. In a healthy economy, the bank would fund them with huge profits, but in our current struggling economy, it would instead bury that institution under a mountain of bad debt in one fell swoop. Nevertheless, if the merged bank could prepare itself for those massive loans, it should be able to make a huge leap of progress in sorting its bad debts through the merger.

"Struggling companies will go belly-up all at once. Who's struggling the most right now?"

Going belly-up—in other words, going bankrupt or failing.

On the table in front of me sat some cake and steaming black tea.

Ichijou answered my question without hesitation. It was at that moment I decided to put him in charge of Keika Bank and Keika Holdings, something Tachibana had already suggested.

"Likely the major Sougou Department Stores. I assume you saw this coming, seeing as you sold off our bad debts cheaply to the Resolution and Collection Corporation?"

"Who can say?"

Once a company went bust, any debt it had naturally became irrecoverable. Banks held reserves for these situations, but when those reserves weren't enough to make up for the money lost, it would influence the bank's earnings, if not force the bank itself to fold.

Keika Bank had sold these types of dangerous loans off cheaply and prepared a large reserve in case of debtor bankruptcy, finding

itself in a huge amount of debt as a result. Incredibly, it had then wiped out that debt in one fell swoop, using a special loan from the Bank of Japan and reverse mergers to plug the gap, before an actualization of unrealized profits did away with the debt for good.

The price for that feat was loss of stable earning potential for the bank, whose business model now meant most of its loans (which were bad) were sold off to the Resolution and Collection Corporation. The bank's small-scale division had a foundation within the former Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank, but both the Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan and the Nihon Credit Bank had always failed with small-scale finance—hence why I'd drastically teamed up with Silicon Valley to make money operating internet banking. Presently, Keika Bank's earnings came from dividends from government bonds, the aforementioned internet banking project, Ichiyama Securities' wholesale division, and the Moonlight Fund's activities.

"Cash flow seems to be a pressing problem. Wholesale companies have been asking for my advice regarding it."

Convenience stores were the future; department stores would eventually come to be seen as unnecessary. Nevertheless, the existence of these wholesale suppliers made it impossible to be rid of them completely. Regional small and mid-sized companies were reliant on these suppliers for their earnings, so their failure could lead to a string of bankruptcies in a domino effect.

"We ought to consider integrating their business management with that of Teisei Department Stores. Let the Resolution and Collection Corporation know we're willing to bail them out—as long as they apply the Keika Rules."

"Does that mean you intend to buy Sachii?"

"While I would like to, they seem to have fixed their cash flow issues."

Unlike Sougou Department Stores, major supermarket chain Sachii had promoted a new managing director who had successfully fixed their cash flow problems and put the business in a somewhat better position. His success had been helped by historical highs in the company's stock value, so it was hard to pinpoint what exactly was going on behind the scenes.

"Securitization is sending the inner workings of this whole thing into a panic spiral, and I fear things will break down if you do nothing, my lady. If DK Bank does indeed merge, I say we cut it out and sacrifice it."

The Commercial Bank of Japan was the main bank for Sougou Department Stores, while DK Bank supported Sachii.

"So we'll oversee some bailout mergers for Sougou, and buy up Sachii once it has been liquidated."

"Yes, my lady."

I scattered some amusement into my tone as I added my next point. "Oh yes. You'll be the helmsman of Keika Holdings as soon as it comes into being next year, and you'll be there for five years at least. I want you to put together a team you trust and select a suitable successor when the time comes." I put down the receiver. Knowing Ichijou, he'd probably be crying with a combination of happiness and the weight of his new responsibilities.

I put a forkful of cake into my mouth. "Wait, what were we talking about again?"

"I believe we were supposed to be speaking about the opera company, milady" Tachibana said.

I continued to eat my cake, ignoring his tone. We had digressed wildly from the topic at hand.

This was a world that dealt with money in the billions, or even trillions. There were bound to be lots of people targeting me, both openly and covertly.

"Having connections within the entertainment industry also protects you from the media. Several television companies in this country started out as newspaper companies. Keep those television networks in check, and you hold back the newspapers behind them. It would certainly help to get rid of those reporters constantly hounding you."

Talent agencies provided TV stations with actors, but once those actors had their big break, the relationship between their agency and the TV networks totally flipped. And while these TV stations were originally newspaper companies, TV was usually where they made the real money. Being able to use these agencies as a card against the mass media would be a good long-term goal.

"I'm pretty sure Governor Iwasawa's younger brother runs a talent agency that's looking to shoot a movie. We could send anyone he might find useful his way."

A movie based on a novel about a girl modelled after me sure was embarrassing, but we were at that point in history where police dramas were experiencing a boom. Providing Governor Iwasawa with money and an actress would be a good way to make sure he owed me later. I phoned up a TV station in Hokkaido and asked them to connect me to the producer of a certain program.

"All right. Go ahead and put me in as a sponsor for the opera company. I do want to see their devotion to their work for myself, though. Hello? This is Keikain. I sponsor your network. I have a proposal I would like to get your permission for…"

And that was how the KDK Imperial Opera Company's top stars were broadcast traveling in their bus overnight, joined by some of the regulars of Hokkaido's regional New Year's Gold Show. I felt just a *little* guilty.

The KDK Imperial Opera Company became the Keika Opera Company. The company performed in theaters not just in Tokyo, but

at halls in Teisei Department Stores across the country. And it expanded its activities, its main gig being with a Hokkaido-based TV station. A certain troupe also put on performances at Teisei Stores—a troupe containing members who were regulars on a certain show—and then there was Iwasawa Productions and the detective drama it was producing. I sponsored actors for both. But that's a story for a different day.

"A merger has been announced between Sougou Department Stores, a major chain of stores that has been struggling as of late, and Teisei Department Stores. It is being regarded as an attempt by Teisei to bail out Sougou.

Sougou Department Stores made use of the bubble to expand and open several branch stores. Its problems started once the bubble burst. The chain's flagship store in Kobe was dealt a further blow via damage from the Great Hanshin earthquake. The Resolution and Collection Corporation—which bought the chain's debts from its main banks, the Commercial Bank of Japan and the former Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan—is spearheading the merger. Sougou Department Stores' well-liked managing director has taken responsibility for his company's management crisis by resigning. The banks are supporting the company by writing off six hundred thirty billion yen worth of debt.

The Commercial Bank of Japan had already announced a three-way merger with the Fuyou and DK Banks before this news broke. As Sougou Department Stores was CBJ's biggest source of bad debt, there is gossip within the financial world that the intent was to smarten itself up before the merge.

Teisei Department Stores also struggled post-bubble and is still undergoing restructuring under the Keika Group's Akamatsu Corporation. The hope is that this merger will not result in joint bankruptcy…"

December 22.

The world was getting ready for Christmas. That afternoon, I was enjoying a milk tea and Portuguese *pastéis de nata* in one corner of Avanti. Pastéis de nata were due to become wildly popular in Japan soon under the name “egg tarts,” and I was glad to see this store leading the way.

“Oh, you’re here, Keikain.”

“I just came back from seeing a movie. I’ve got a party later on, so I’m trying to clear my head before then.”

Christmas parties were all about showing off a family’s influence, and attending was difficult. The Keikain family was throwing one, as were Eichi-kun and Yuujirou-kun’s families. Mitsuya-kun’s family didn’t especially need to throw such a party, but we’d already said we’d be too busy to go.

“What did you see?” After ordering himself a latte and some chocolate cake, Mitsuya-kun sat down across from me. He had with him a large bag from a bookstore—presumably containing new purchases. I knew he liked to read here whenever he had the time.

“It was an Indian movie, over three hours long. The actual story took about an hour and a half though. What books have you got there?”

“This. I’ve been reading through the genre you recommended to me, and this is apparently the most popular.”

He was right. It was the book that built a generation. In return, I showed him the book I’d just bought.

“I’ve never seen that one before.”

“Yep, because it’s a magical girl novel!”

For a while, there was no conversation. There was only the sound of us flicking through our books. It was then that the next customer showed up.

“Oh, there you are. I’ve been looking for you two.”

“Hello, Yuujirou-kun.”

“What’s wrong, Izumikawa?”

Yuujirou-kun sat down and ordered a milk tea and a tiramisu before explaining.

“I’m going back to my hometown this evening, and I wanted to say goodbye before I went. Thank you so much for being my friends this year. I hope we can have just as much fun next year!”

“Same here.”

“Me too.”

Yuujirou-kun bowed his head and we responded by bowing our own. To think this uniquely Japanese gesture was already written into our DNA at this age. Actually, it was because these two were way ahead of their ages in terms of maturity. That was probably it.

“We won’t see each other until next semester.” I sighed. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Have you got any plans for the vacation, Keikain-san?” Yuujirou-kun asked.

I waited until the waitress had set down his tea and cake before I answered. “I’ve grown a little less inconspicuous, so I have invitations from all over the place.”

“‘Conspicuous’ is definitely a suitable word to describe you.”

I’d debuted as Teisei Department Stores’ poster girl, and the Teia International Philharmonic Orchestra had asked me to sing Beethoven’s Ninth for them. I would have loved to, if not for the fact that, as boss of the Moonlight Fund, I’d been asked to team up with Vice President Izumikawa to help put together some grand designs for the government’s financial administration in the fight against bad debts. I couldn’t help but think it shouldn’t come down to me. Not when they had the newly instated Chairman Yanagitani of the

Financial Reconstruction Commission, who was in Vice President Izumikawa's faction, or Ichijou and Tachibana, who'd I used to help deal with the bad debts via Keika Bank.

"You guys were all here, huh?"

I turned to the café's entrance to see Eiichi-kun. He ordered his usual from the waitress: a cola.

"Yes. Are you traveling today too, Eiichi-kun?" I asked.

"Nah. We're not going back to Chuubu till after the Christmas Eve party, but I thought I'd drop by and say my goodbyes now."

The Teia Group was based in the Chuubu region. That was where Eiichi-kun's main residence was, though his family held an estate here in Tokyo. We were about to go through the same motions with him as we had with Yuujirou-kun, which, though they felt repetitive, were hugely important.

"I'm returning today," Yuujirou-kun said.

"I see. Thanks for the great year, guys. Let's make next year great too!"

Yuujirou-kun, Mitsuya-kun, and I all voiced our agreement. Suddenly overcome by amusement, I started to laugh.

"What's so funny, Runa?"

"Well, I mean—none of us are likely to meet over Christmas in the future either. I bet we'll be meeting up at this café every year to wish each other well before we each go home for the holidays."

Eiichi-kun paused for a moment before calling the manager over.

"I'd like to book this table, if that's okay. For December 22 next year. And the year after. And the years after that as well."

"Understood." The manager bowed and agreed without complaint; he knew who we were. I followed him with my eyes as he

walked away, only to catch sight of what was happening outside the window.

"Oh! It's snowing."

Snowflakes danced through the air. They weren't the type to stick, but that was what filled them with Christmas cheer. We spent the rest of our precious time in that café reading and talking about nothing of much importance until evening.

"It's about time I get going. I shall see you all next year."

"Goodbye, Yuujirou-kun."

Yuujirou-kun stepped outside and waved at us before getting into the car that was waiting for him. Mitsuya-kun left next, waving goodbye before heading in the direction of the subway station.

"See ya, Runa."

"Goodbye, Eiichi-kun."

Eiichi-kun was about to step into his car when he turned and came back to me. I blinked at him, and he told me the one thing he'd forgotten to say.

"Merry Christmas, Runa."

"…Merry Christmas, Eiichi-kun."

Dear God, even if I fall to my utter ruin, please don't let me forget the time I spent with them. Please let me keep creating these precious memories with them until then…

"Hello? Oh, Keikain. What's the matter?"

"Nothing major. I just wanted to wish you a happy New Year."

"Ah. Yes, that's very much like you."

"However, that is only half my reason for making this call. The other reason is because I wanted to test out this new phone."

“Ah, you have a PHS? Those things are certainly useful for making calls.”

“Useful indeed—but frightfully expensive.”

PHS was inexpensive for students—and vastly popular—but we were still grade-schoolers. If we could get our families to foot the bill it was fine, but if not, it was a real strain on our allowances. Every child in my class who had one faced the same problem.

“Don’t you invest in telecommunications companies? I would have thought the cost was the least of your worries.”

“Unfortunately not. Telecommunications isn’t my main investment, after all.”

“Are you hooked up to Teia and Izumikawa via that thing?”

“Yes. Can you imagine the esteemed Teia Group headquarters in Chuubu *not* having access to PHS? I also made sure there was an antenna station near the vice president’s house. I’ll be calling both of them after this conversation.”

“I see. Let them know I send my best wishes.”

“I will. Happy New Year again.”

“Hello? This is Izumikawa.”

“It’s Keikain. Are you free to talk?”

“I suppose so, yes. The guests have started drinking so us children have been dismissed. Did you need something?”

“Nothing really. Just wishing you a happy New Year.”

“Oh. Happy New Year to you too.”

“Mitsuya-kun asked me to pass on his best wishes too.”

“You phoned him already, did you? Can I assume you’re going to call Eiichi-kun next?”

“Yes. You two can be a struggle to pin down, you know. You never seem to have a spare moment between parties.”

"I can't argue with you there. In that case, pass on my best wishes to Eiichi-kun, would you?"

"I will. By the way, how are you finding your PHS?"

"It isn't half bad. I was worried about the connection, but I can hear you quite clearly."

"That's a relief."

"Did you say all four of us are connected now?"

"That's right. Things are set to get busier, so I made sure all of us had access to one for easier contact."

"It's certainly very generous of you—but to go so far as to invest in a cellular company…"

"Major stockholders are in the best position to get a company to listen to their requests. It was my intention to buy the entire company, but I don't have the money."

"Yes, that tends to happen when you bail out and buy up several new and existing companies."

"You're completely right. Anyway, I don't want to keep you, so I'll hang up now. Have a good evening."

"Okay. You too!"

"Hello? Oh, it's you, Runa."

"Why do you sound so dismissive? I'm calling you up to wish you a happy New Year out of the goodness of my heart, you know!"

"I guess. Happy New Year."

"And now you're cutting ahead of me. Happy New Year as well…"

"Does this mean your New Year's party's over already?"

"Yes. I'm in my room right now, eating the New Year's soba and watching *Old Year, New Year*."

"You're a big eater, huh?"

"…This is a special occasion."

"That's the same excuse you use for dessert. I just hope you're not screaming the first time you step on the scale in the new year."

"If I do any screaming, it'll be at you during the civil war you seem to be trying to start."

"I was just kidding! Sorry. I don't wanna spend our New Year's phone call fighting."

"Okay. Let's put it behind us then. Oh, that's right! Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun wanted me to pass on their best wishes for you."

"Listen, thanks for the PHS, but we're all paying outta pocket for this. Most grade-schoolers wouldn't be able to afford all these calls."

"My advice would be to call from one of your companies and have your family pay for it, if they're all right with that. Although I agree it will become a problem, so I'd like to do something about it. Are you paying for your own calls, Eiichi-kun?"

"Yeah. Yuujirou, Mitsuya, and I have started up a business to cover the costs."

"I'm paying for mine as well. So what sort of business are we talking?"

"Making mobile sites. Did you know Mitsuya was into that kinda thing? We're basically putting together simple sites to the point they're ready to go online. Stuff like sites where people can leave reviews on cars they bought, look up the travel time to their destinations and the congestion on expressways, and submit their thoughts on hotels, food, and tourist spots from their vacations. They can also look up the news and weather at their destinations."

"Eiichi-kun. If you're serious about this, I'd be happy to invest and introduce you to some people from Silicon Valley."

“You’re saying it’s a good idea, huh?”

“Enough that I’m confident to spend my money on it. If you put together a document explaining the project, I’ll seriously consider financing it.”

“I never thought kids like us could borrow money and set up businesses here in Japan. We were just planning to sell off the idea to our families or something and use the money to pay our phone bills.”

“You wanted to sell the rights to a web-based project to the Teia Group? In that case, I’m even more eager to be involved.”

“Okay, I hear you. Let’s talk about this again at school. See the time? Let’s at least ring in the New Year like kids our age should.”

“Oh! I didn’t realize it was so late. One more minute… Possibly the longest minute ever!”

“Yet the entire year went by in a flash, huh? Thinking back, us four spent most of it together. Thirty seconds!”

“Ten…five, four, three, two, one…! Happy New Year, Eiichi-kun!”

“Happy New Year, Runa. Let’s make it another good one.”

It snowed. It snowed even during our lessons. It kept snowing, even after school. All that snow left us with only one option.

“Snowball fight!!!”

Only three other children—the usual three—were interested. Even though I was willing to do everything to make sure the fight wasn’t dangerous. In fact, without that preparation, the fight would have been a nonstarter. The first step was changing into our gym clothes. Next came gloves, helmets, and elbow and shin guards. Finally, goggles to protect our eyes.

Just in case.

“I borrowed all of this equipment from the P.E. committee!”

“How come you only take the initiative when it comes to stuff like this?” Eiichi-kun asked, so I shot him back a peace sign.

If anything, I was surprised the school even had all this equipment. I only knew about it because I saw it being used during field day. And now that we were fully equipped, we’d attracted some typical curiosity from the other children. They crowded around us to see what was going on.

“What are the win conditions for a fight like this?” Yuujirou-kun asked.

Snowball fights have rules, don’t you know?

“There are several varieties of the game, so let’s stick to the simplest for now,” Mitsuya-kun replied. “We each have a flag, one white and one red, and the team to have their flag knocked down by snowballs first loses.”

The crowd from before consisted of a handful of children from our class, and a few from others; looking around, there were between ten and twenty potential players.

“Won’t hitting these flags be difficult?” I asked.

Eiichi-kun looked thoughtful for a while. Then he went to fetch some nearby planks and set them behind the flags standing up in the snow. Aiming a snowball at one of the planks, it hit and fell with ease.

“Ah, now things are getting interesting.”

“What d’you mean by that, Runa?”

Now that we were dealing with flags *and* planks, the range of strategy that could be applied to this game had expanded.

“Let’s have the planks facing the enemy. Then we can simply aim for the planks to knock the flag down.”

“Great idea. Let’s split into teams and get started!”

We decided on our two teams by rock-paper-scissors. I was paired up with Mitsuya-kun.

"You take command, Keikain."

"Me?"

Mitsuya-kun explained, the other children around us listening in. "I'm not good at being a leader, unfortunately. It takes the ability to get other people to understand your point of view." Mitsuya-kun had his eye on Eiichi-kun, the leader for the other team. Yuujirou-kun stood behind him, making the pair look like general and advisor. Things weren't looking up for us.

"We won't win against them unless we have just as formidable a leader."

"Exactly. That leader is you, Keikain."

I checked out the other team again. They were very obviously raring to go—particularly Eiichi-kun.

"I'll come up with the plan. You work on rousing the troops."

"Got it."

The snowball fight began.

"Go! *Chaaaaarge!!!*"

"We won't lose! Force them back!"

There were no specific tactics since we were just grade-schoolers. We simply threw snowballs. I tried to make my movements showy to inspire the rest of our team. Even the strategy we came up with couldn't be anything too fancy. I was to draw the attention of the enemy, while Mitsuya-kun aimed for their flag from behind me. It worked precisely because we were all in our gym clothes and wearing goggles, so it was impossible to tell who was who. Although in my case, my blonde hair shone against the white snow.

"Oof!"

A snowball smacked against my outstretched hand and disintegrated. Right behind my hand was the flag. Of course the snowball was one of Eiichi-kun's.

"You have some real control, being able to aim right for the flag like that! Have you considered becoming a pro baseball player?"

"Y'know, it sounds tempting. All I want right now though is to make you taste defeat!"

One snowball came flying. Then another, and another. I intercepted them all with my arms and legs. I was only able to do it because my body was overpowered.

"You're way too annoying when you're on the other team, Runa," Eiichi-kun panted.

"Speak for yourself, Eiichi-kun!"

His fourth snowball met one of mine in the air, and they splintered on impact, sending snow flying everywhere. The break in our stalemate came from an unexpected source.

"You're waiting for Mitsuya to back you up from behind, right? Well, we've already dealt with him!"

"Hmph! Yuujirou-kun may have him occupied, but I know Mitsuya-kun will be able to break free!"

"You called?" Yuujirou-kun popped up from behind Eiichi-kun and lobbed a snowball at me. I repelled it with a hand, only for it to explode in my face and cover my goggles with snow.

"Oh no!"

I felt another snowball whizz past me, and I turned to see our flag collapsed by the impact. My first snowball fight in this life ended in defeat.

"It was obvious that you were taking charge and Mitsuya was aiming from behind."

Once our snowball fight was done, we moved on to the next obvious thing: building snowmen. Other children joined us, and soon the school courtyard was dotted with little snowmen.

"And once I knew he'd come from behind you, it'd be easy to get your flag as long as we kept you in check. So I got you in a one-on-one fight and had Yuujirou deal the winning blow from behind me."

"That was so unfair! *Real* warriors don't get help for their one-on-one fights!"

Eiichi-kun and I were rolling up a large snowball together to make our snowman. We were in charge of the body. Having already made the snowman's head, Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun approached us.

"'The warrior doesn't care if he's called a beast or a dog; the main thing is winning.' Is that how it goes?"

"Yes, Asakura Norikage. But give it up, Keikain. A loss is a loss. I'm sorry, though. I spent too much time trying to protect us from the rear instead of focusing in front."

At the end of the day, it wasn't like I was actually mad—but I was a girl, so it was my job to sulk in a way that only a boy (or three) had the right to fix.

"Hmph! Keikain and I won't lose next time!"

"Next time, huh? Yeah, we should totally do this again!"

To cheer me up was a right, but it wasn't a duty. If they weren't aware of that difference, that was fine by me.

The four of us lifted the snowman's head and made him complete. When we were done, we broke into applause, as did the others around us.

“Nice work, everybody! When you’re all changed, please gather in the school cafeteria. I’ve made sure there will be some hot cocoa to warm you all up!”

Eiichi-kun stepped up to me and began whispering in my ear. I supposed he wasn’t the type to let a special right go unused. “Runa. Wanna come to Avanti once we’re done in the cafeteria? My treat.”

I paused. “…I’ll have a slice of chocolate cake.”

We wouldn’t have time for things like this once we’d grown up. When I looked back then, I’d probably be able to count the number of snowball fights and snowmen I’d built on one hand. That’s why I’m leaving a record of it here.

Our snowman melted the next day, never to return.

I walked out of the station into a world of snow. Clad in our skiwear, we stepped out onto the silvery earth.

“Let’s get skiing!”

I did just that, traversing the course with snowplough turns—as was everyone else.

Imperial Gakushuukan Academy’s winter treasure was its ski lodge. It was supposed to be used for weekend skiing, with the typical pattern being two nights and three days. However, I’d heard that it was first set up by companies in the industry to advertise winter sports and give the kids a taste for them. The mastermind behind that plot was none other than Teisei Rail.

We traveled to Karuizawa Station, a station much improved by the addition of the Shinkansen service, and instead of staying at the ski lodge, we used a hotel by the station as a base for our skiing and skating activities.

At the time, Karuizawa Station wasn’t exactly modern. Also, it was freezing.

“I’d really like to see the views!”

“Wait, Runa! Don’t go any further!”

“You started trying to parallel ski first, Eiichi-kun.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you…”

The first thing to learn in this sport was how to fall. Next was how to walk. Only then could you start skiing. Luckily for me, I had knowledge from my former life, so I didn’t have to bother with those basics. I went straight on to snowploughing. While Eiichi-kun, a complete beginner, was struggling as he tried to dive straight into parallel skiing, I was slowly and carefully enjoying the brilliant white slope. I took a lift to the summit, and the loud music they always played at ski resorts started to grow quieter.

The fluttering snow and the clear blue skies were nothing short of gorgeous.

“Check this out, Runa! I’m parallel skiing!”

“You’re a fast learner, Eiichi-kun.”

“I’ve been working hard on this the whole time, that’s why!”

A few hours later, all three of them were making impressive parallel turns across the snowy ground. It should be noted that our roles were now reversed; they were the ones forcing me to learn how to parallel ski. They were good teachers on top of being good at everything else.

Talk about *unfair*.

“Hey, Runa?”

“Keikain-san? Um…”

“You certainly like to eat…”

“Huh? What’s the matter?”

There was a group of us, each from a prestigious background, so the hotel had accommodated us accordingly—although we hadn't reserved the whole mountain, meaning other skiers were free to use it with us. All that skiing had made me a little peckish. When some spare time came up, I made good use of it to "get lost" and find a restaurant to treat myself to a meal.

In front of me was a simple curry—a staple for a place like this. It was expensive, and I couldn't blame the boys for being confused that everyone seemed to be eating it.

"You can't go wrong with curry. Ramen, on the other hand, can go *very* wrong if you're not lucky."

"Curry's good, yeah. But at that price?" For some reason, Eiichi-kun didn't seem to realize that the cola he was drinking was also being sold at an inflated price.

Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun seemed more interested in the aforementioned ramen.

"Keikain-san, what is ramen gone 'very wrong' to you, exactly?"

"Don't do it," Mitsuya-kun warned. "You don't want to waste that much money on something inedible."

"The worst ramen I've ever had? It was a *shouyu* ramen, but the soup was literally just hot water. There was some dashi in bottles on the table for you to add if you thought it was too 'weak,' but those bottles were the only thing that made it *shouyu* at all."

The boys stared at me as I chomped away at my curry. There was no getting this wrong. It tasted like every other ready-meal curry you could buy in a store. Having it at a ski resort made a nice change, plus it was tasty.

After dinner, we had some free time. While the boys were hanging out together, I took a mountain of hundred-yen coins to the hotel's arcade. I knew the prices were exorbitant, but the mood just struck me.

“What are you doing?”

I jumped. “Oh, you’re all here! Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

I’d seated myself at a gaudy shooting game, loaded it with coins, and had already started playing when the three boys showed up. There was no way they hadn’t seen me.

“The year 2219? What, this game’s set in the near future?”

“Looks like the bullets you’re using against enemies on the ground aren’t like regular bullets.”

“You keep locking on like that, those enemies in the sky are going to hit you.”

“Shut up!” I yelled, only to be greeted with a “game over” screen a moment later. I needed these three to feel my pain. “You play then! I’ll pay for you.”

“No need. We’ve got our hundred-yen coins already.”

Eiichi-kun went first, only to be beaten spectacularly by the first boss. Incidentally, I’d made it to the third boss. Yuujirou-kun died in level two, Mitsuya-kun in level four.

“Since we’re all here now, why don’t we play a fighting game? We can go against each other.”

“What’s that?” Eiichi-kun asked, and I promptly explained.

None of them had played a fighting game before, so they practiced on story mode until they were ready to go multiplayer. We played a round-robin tournament. Having just a little more experience than them, I won three matches in a row. Eiichi-kun came second, and Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun came third and fourth respectively.

“That was so much fun! Shall we head back now?”

“No! Let’s play another round! Just one!”

“We can’t. Our free time will be over soon.”

“Teia certainly is hooked…”

Eiichi-kun didn’t get his way, and we left the arcade behind. Just before we left, I glanced at one of the game machines in the corner. It was strip mahjong, with a sticker over the top claiming it was “broken.” It sure was nice of the hotel to protect us kids from anything inappropriate.

“The student-council-and-committee unity meeting is due to start. Student council leaders and committee members from all education levels, please assemble.”

“I didn’t realize it was that late already.”

“You two go home ahead of us, Eiichi-kun, Mitsuya-kun.”

“Sure. See you guys tomorrow.”

“The ‘Daimyo’s Procession,’ is it? Who on earth thought that up? It’s a complete anachronism.”

At the start of the new semester, the prestigious Imperial Gakushuukan Academy had been given the right to self-govern. Parents being parents, there were some things they had no say in, but since they were the same parents whose donations kept the school running, self-government was a logical conclusion.

Whenever power was available but could only be held by limited people, fighting was inevitable. At this school, the battlefield to fight for such power were these “unity meetings.” However, not everyone at these meetings was equal. It was a hierarchal structure with the high-school students at the top, followed by the junior high level, and finally, us grade-school peons. Thinking about it, it made sense. The students here would mostly grow up to oversee others, so it made sense to give them a thorough understanding of societal structures in this way.

For high-ranking noble children like me, seniority-based hierarchies were necessary knowledge. Giving us this experience was likely a way to teach us about management and give us a deeper understanding of our societal authority. This sandbox environment led a lot of people to reveal their faults, which ultimately tripped them up. The college-aged students weren't included in these meetings because, at that level, the institution wanted to attract students from more varied backgrounds, and so separated them from these potentially fierce gatherings.

"Good afternoon. Please pardon me for being late."

"Good afternoon. Please, don't worry about it, Keikain-san. Shall we go?"

Shisuka Lydia-senpai was in the grade above me. She came from Karafuto and was the daughter of a marquess. A dignified committee member from her class, her background, among other things, inspired hatred from others. She was the perfect example of a villainess, and secretly I admired her for it.

"Good afternoon, Shisuka-senpai, Keikain-san, Izumikawa-san."

Asuka-chan's greeting was followed by a silent bow from Hotaru-chan. Both of them were, of course, in the student council too.

As grade-schoolers, all of us were small fry in the hierarchy of the unity meeting. We were to line up and go to the junior high section to join with them, then we would all go to the high-school buildings to get the older students. This process was given the nickname "the Daimyo's Procession." I don't know *who* gave it that name, but I was genuinely impressed by it.

"I didn't think you'd take part in the procession, Keikain-san."

"Why not?"

Yuujirou-kun and I walked leisurely at the back of the line. We were allowed to talk, as long as we weren't too loud. The people

around us didn't quite bow down as we passed, but they did get out of the way, which was quite the power rush. It was enjoyable, but I was cautious about letting it go to my head.

"Many noble children dislike having to walk at the back, and so they don't take part at all. Not until junior high or high school level, at least."

"I can understand why they'd feel that way, but I think it's an important opportunity to learn what life at the back of the line is like. It would be a waste to skip out on such an experience."

Unlike at our level, the council's authority and budget shot up dramatically once you got to the junior-high level and beyond. Some of the courtiers even used their parents' authority and wealth to try to usurp the powers of others, leading to quarrels between families. This was balanced out by the students who overcame the pandemonic, ghastly power struggles to manage the student council with perfect control. These were the students who went on to do great things involving large companies, zaibatsu, and high-ranking government positions.

The protagonist of the game would go on to lead a movement to reform this system, and her and I would clash in the high-school student council. That was one of the main plot points of the game.

"I agree. There's nothing wrong with experiencing the back of the line if you're aiming for the top!" Asuka-chan joined the conversation quite naturally, and Hotaru-chan nodded her agreement. Joining the student council or committees at our stage was something that only students from political families—like Asuka-chan and Yuujirou-kun—really saw the point of.

Hotaru-chan, on the other hand, mostly stayed quiet and did the work she was assigned. It would be nice if she could do something more active which required her to speak.

“Keikain-san, are you going to try to join the courtiers at all?” a student from another class asked me, and I instantly sensed everyone around us listening intently for my response. The courtiers were a huge clique of noble student with high family status who took the lead when it came to all matters Gakushuukan. The name was a reference to the court officials of old who attended to the Emperor of Japan, reflecting the group’s high-society nature. Alongside this group, there was another group of students with family backgrounds in the zaibatsu, and one of regular students too. I’d also been invited to join the zaibatsu-based clique, of course.

“I’m still quite young. I’d like to try out and learn all sorts of things before making any commitments.” I gave a vague rejection, something a young girl like myself should not have been capable of.

I heard another voice then, one that was cheerful and cared little about my refusal. “Oh? But I would like you to join.”

I saw a girl who was the spitting image of a young, traditional Japanese maiden. Her dark hair and beautiful features would have matched a kimono perfectly. Her part in the Daimyo’s Procession meant she must have been a class representative too. She bowed her head at me politely.

“Pardon me for not introducing myself. My name is Asagiri Kaoru, and I am the second daughter of Marquess Asagiri. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Not at all. I should have introduced myself first. I am Keikain Runa, of the Keikain Dukedom. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” I bowed my head in return. Since I wasn’t part of the main family, I didn’t mention my parents or birth order. My family’s actions were well-known in noble circles, so while a dukedom should technically stand above a march, realistically, in most cases, I was socially at the same level or even below. Despite that, everyone liked to pretend that a

person's family status or wealth didn't matter at school. At this moment, Asagiri-san and I were treating each other as equals.

The two of us smiled sweetly at each other, and everyone around us—including Asuka-chan, Yuujirou-kun, and Lydia-senpai—took a step back. They couldn't tell whether I intended to start a fight or if I wanted to make Asagiri-san an ally. Hotaru-chan was staring blankly, not understanding the situation at all, which was somewhat comforting.

Asagiri-san explained herself further. "Sakurako-oneesama's fiancé always speaks about you, Runa-sama, to the extent she almost finds it *too much*. Because of that, I thought I should get to know you."

I suddenly knew who this girl was: the younger sister of Nakamaro-oniisama's fiancée.

The following is the structure of Imperial Gakushuukan Academy's student council and various committees.

The Disciplinary Committee—its job is to enforce school rules. It is self-governing and relatively powerful as a force that uses students to discipline students.

The P.E. Committee—supports physical education lessons and is involved in the running of sports clubs and field day. Packed with those whose interests lie in the athletic industries.

The Culture Committee—supports lessons in the arts and is involved in the running of arts clubs and the culture festival. Also attracts those with financial interests in related industries.

The Health Committee—supports the physical inspections and the school nurse. Its duties are numerous. A popular committee, as it gives one a legitimate excuse to go to the nurse's office.

The Broadcasting Committee—with the broadcasting room as its base, it is responsible for any and all broadcasts within the school, as well as the publication of the wall newspapers and many other jobs. This committee acts as representatives of the students when the board of trustees and school staff need to deal with the mass media.

The Library Committee—supports the operation of the school library. It works under the supervision of the librarian, with members given the option of eventually working in the library themselves. This committee has a say in which books are bought for the library, though instructions from the manager of the central library and the committee advisor's views take precedence.

The Beautification Committee—responsible not only for cleanliness within the school, but the upkeep of the school gardens as well. Though the work itself is done by those in the industry, the committee gets a say in how it is done, so this committee tends to attract those with financial interests in those industries.

The Ceremonial Committee—supports the entrance and graduation ceremonies, as well as field day and the culture festival. Essentially, they are in charge of all events within the school.

Each committee had one or two members from each class who worked under the committee's president. The committee hierarchies were also split horizontally, with high schoolers commanding the junior high students, and junior high students in charge of the grade-schoolers. This was where things got a little more complicated. Each level of command had its committee students working underneath it.

In other words, each section on the chain of command had two levels.

So, who had more power? A high schoolers' committees' presidents, or the executive layer of the junior high schoolers?

If you couldn't answer that question, you were in for a horrendously confusing time, but the answer became more obvious once you realized that Japanese companies worked under a seniority-based system and favored a bottom-up approach to management. That meant that in this case, it was the high schoolers' committees' presidents who were in charge. Such a system didn't give the junior high schoolers much to do, hence why they had their own pawns in the form of *their* committee representatives. Within a class itself, it was the committees that took precedence.

Such a complex system was pretty much impossible to explain to grade-schoolers, but they were kids. Whoever put their hand up first was the one who ended up taking the lead—and the one who ended up as the representative for their class committee.

The executive layer of each class was chosen via a vote cast by the class committees, and it was class committee members who ran for the positions. This was likely to keep the two groups separate. Oh, and one more thing: the executive layer of each class was responsible for negotiations with the board of trustees and teachers. It was their job to suck up to those two groups.

"This system is frightful, don't you think?" Yuujirou-kun scoffed beside me as we studied the diagram outlining the structure of the school committees, but his face was pale. Asuka-chan, who stood next to him, also looked somewhat grim. I wasn't quite sure what Yuujirou-kun was referring to exactly, but fortunately he was about to explain. "This looks *identical* to the diagram of pork-barrel politicians within Father's party."

"Oh, I see."

In other words, this was a practical application of such political games. Positions were decided by someone's affiliations and seniority. If you lost the game of musical chairs for an executive position, your options were either to hang your head and go back,

ruined, to one of the class-level committees, or to use the strength of your “faction” to regain your power.

“By the way, Yuujirou-kun, how are you planning to build your career?”

“Well…” Yuujirou-kun gave it some thought before answering. “This school doesn’t have a financial committee. The executive layers are the ones in charge of budgets, so I’ll need to find a spot in some committee somewhere, or I might be in trouble career-wise. I think the ceremonial committee would be a good start for me.”

“The ceremonial committee? Not the P.E. committee or the cultural committee?”

“No. The ceremonial committee has access to the school’s entire event schedule. That’s what I’m after.”

Capable people were more concerned with managing time than money—Ichijou was the same. It was an interesting observation, so I made a mental note of it. In the game, Yuujirou-kun would go on to become a political staff member for the protagonist and hound me mercilessly due to the political strife.

“After that, I’ll aim to get into the executive layer. The executive part of the student council runs the student council presidential elections, and that president gets to pick their vice president, treasurer, and secretary, so I’ll aim to become treasurer. As long as I do an impressive job there, I should be able to gain a following.”

“That’s quite the optimistic career plan…”

“Of course. I’m guaranteed to be chosen as treasurer as long as Eiichi-kun runs too.”

Now I understood. Yuujirou-kun showed me an amused smile and gave me a pat on the shoulder.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that you’ll be vice president. I look forward to working with you.”

Wait, was he counting on me to get involved in all of this too? I wanted to push the matter, but we were interrupted by the giggle of a third party.

“You two certainly are funny! I should like to get to know you better.”

It was Asagiri-san, who sat next to me. I looked at her, and Yuujirou-kun and I brought our conversation to a close. She hardly seemed like a bad person, but she *had* introduced herself very clearly as a noble girl and made her intent to get closer to me clear. There was no such thing as too much caution when it came to such people.

“I’ve known about your Quartet for some time from all the rumors. I’ve heard all about your achievements as a foursome.”

“My, my, how embarrassing.”

“But that is why everybody speaks of you! They are all eager to know which factions you are likely to join.”

I realized something then. Each of us four had a different background, whether noble, zaibatsu-affiliated, political, or bureaucratic. And all four of those had a separate faction.

“I doubt we’ll be seeing Eiichi-kun or Mitsuya-kun joining any factions,” Yuujirou-kun remarked.

“What, really?” His assertion surprised me.

“Well, I haven’t heard anything from those two.”

“Because they haven’t said anything.”

Asagiri-san burst out laughing at our comedic exchange. Yuujirou-kun elaborated, not paying her any attention.

“Eiichi-kun said it’s his intention to take over *everything*, if only it gives him the chance to refuse the inevitable invitations to a faction.”

At the moment, Eiichi-kun was part of the ceremonial committee, and Mitsuya-kun was on the disciplinary committee. I

hadn’t realized they were already working to keep control—before they could come under the control of others.

“You and your friends get on so well, Keikain-san.”

I didn’t know what to say to Asagiri-san’s casual comment, but I could feel myself flushing.

If you’d asked me afterward what the rest of the meeting was about, I couldn’t have told you.

The first thing that comes to mind for many Japanese people when they hear the word “spring” is cherry blossoms. And when they think of “cherry blossoms,” the next step is a flower-viewing party. So I decided to have a flower-viewing party at school with all my friends.

It was to take place by Gakushuukan’s central library. The area was a gathering spot for noble children as well as those whose families ran zaibatsu. Once you grew up in those families, it became difficult to participate in flower-viewing parties, so I was grateful we were able to hold this seasonal event now.

It was a bright, quiet afternoon on a day with no school. With permission from the library’s manager, Takamiya Haruka, our modest flower-viewing party was set to begin.

“Runa-chan! We’re here!”

A silent nod from Hotaru-chan accompanied Asuka-chan’s greeting.

“Runa-oneechan!”

Mio-chan’s appearance completed the trio—my friends from kindergarten.

I'd brought the table and food from home, and my maids Saitou Keiko-san and Katsura Naomi-san had used their skills to make us some multi-layered lunch boxes. A blue blanket under the cherry-blossom trees laden with snacks and juice completed the ensemble.

"Welcome, my ladies. I hope you'll continue to be Runa-sama's friend." My maid, Tokitou Aki-san, gave a very prim, maid-like greeting. It was sweet the way she had a compact camera hanging around her neck. I'd asked to help prepare for the picnic, but Aki-san, Tachibana, and my driver, Akanezawa Saburou-san, ended up doing it all, delegating me instead to hosting and making everyone feel welcome.

I suddenly had the sense that I'd been *tricked* somehow.

"Hey, Runa."

"Good afternoon, Keikain-san."

"Thank you for inviting us, Keikain."

The three boys arrived then. Just like the girls, they didn't come empty-handed—a testament to their proper upbringing.

"Flower viewing, huh? This could be fun…" Eiichi-kun looked up at a nearby cherry tree.

"If they're already blooming like this here, it won't be long until they bloom in my hometown," Yuujirou-kun murmured.

"Of course. The cherry blossom front means they all bloom at different times across the country," Mitsuya-kun said.

"I come from Shikoku!" Asuka-chan jumped in. "The blossoms are already starting to fall away there."

Hotaru-chan nodded her agreement.

"Hotaru-oneechan says 'that's right'!" Mio-chan translated.

Us boys and girls sat among the fluttering petals, having a wonderful time. I was reminded again that we could only get away with this because we were kids.

“Oh! I’ve found them!”

“Takahashi-san! Wait a moment! I’m not presentable yet!”

“Hello, Keikain-san. Thank you very much for the invitation.”

Next came Takahashi Akiko-san, Kurimori Shizuka-san, and Katsuki Shiori-san. We got on well, so I decided to invite them, and was overjoyed when they actually showed up.

“Welcome. I hope you three will enjoy yourselves.” I showed them to the blanket. The next guest arrived right after as if on cue.

“Good afternoon, Keikain-san. Thank you very much for inviting me.”

“Welcome, Asagiri-san. Who is this?” I motioned to the unfamiliar girl next to her.

“A pleasure to meet you, Keikain-san. My name is Machiyoi Sanae, eldest daughter of the Machiyoi County. I’m a big fan of yours ever since I heard you sing at the culture festival.”

“Thank you! My name is Keikain Runa, of the Keikain Dukedom. It’s nice to meet you.”

I didn’t realize my performance in the courtyard had earned me any “fans.” The idea made me happy—and slightly embarrassed.

“You all look like you’re having fun.” Takamiya-sensei approached us, apparently wanting to check up on us after giving us permission to use the library grounds.

“Hello, Takamiya-sensei. Thank you very much for granting us permission for this picnic.”

“It looks like you have an extra guest who wishes to join you.”

I followed Takamiya-sensei’s gaze, only to spot a lone student who quickly hid herself away. This situation seemed awfully familiar, and there was no mistaking that golden hair: it was Shisuka Lydia-senpai. I was starting to realize that she wasn’t very good at dealing with social situations.

“Feel free to join us—there’s plenty of space.”

“D-don’t get me wrong! I was just wondering what you were doing. Although I suppose if there’s room, I may as well join you.”

She was a tsundere through and through. Takamiya-sensei had a warm smile on her face, as though she was enjoying our antics.

“Would you like to join us too, Sensei?” I asked.

“If I may. That would be lovely.”

Now that we were all together, I led a toast.

“Thank you all for coming. Let’s use this as an opportunity to get ever closer. Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“When is this rain going to let up?”

The three boys and I were chatting in the library after school that afternoon, just as we did most days. Each of us had a thin strip of paper in front of us to write a wish on. It was the *Tanabata* festival.

“I can never come up with anything when we’re put on the spot like this.” Eiichi-kun was struggling with his wish.

Yuujirou-kun picked up his own piece of paper, twisting it over and over in front of him. Mitsuya-kun had written down his wish—to come first on the next test—almost as soon as we sat down.

“These wishes aren’t going to come true anyway. Just write down any old thing,” he said.

I waved a sassy finger at him. Note that my own paper was also blank. “We mustn’t write down just *anything*. The fun is in thinking about what you want.”

“It stops being fun when you think so hard your brain shuts down.”

“Quiet, Yuujirou-kun,” I commanded him sweetly before turning to Eiichi-kun. His family had a perfect rule for this kind of thing. “Why don’t you apply that *rule*, Eiichi-kun? ‘One Business Per Generation’? No matter what you do, as long as you have a broad objective in mind, that’s where you start.”

“Hearing that from you, who already owns several businesses, isn’t exactly motivating.” Eiichi-kun glared at me.

Mitsuya-kun backed him up, an economics newspaper in one hand. “What’s this? The major shareholder in a bank currently worth over three trillion yen has an opinion?”

“She’s got Teisei Department Stores and the Akamatsu Corporation too—that makes a market cap of more than five trillion,” Yuujirou-kun pointed out.

I found myself giving a vague retort like a politician under fire in the Diet. “It’s not as though I’m *doing* anything by myself. I’m simply in possession of some shares.”

Were we really grade-schoolers, having a conversation like this? I felt my lip curl.

“Runa.” Eiichi-kun’s expression was serious. “I want to surpass you.”

I paused. “Are we talking…height?”

“I’m already taller than you!” Eiichi-kun snapped. He really *had* been sensitive about his height. Me telling him not to worry because he’d grow into a tall, handsome man one day hadn’t helped, apparently. “I mean in *business*.”

“I don’t do ‘business.’ I’m an investor.”

All three boys shook their heads at my remark. Why, I had no idea.

“What are those plans and illustrations next to that paper there, Runa?”

I showed them to him with a smile. They were plans for the building in Kudanshita, which formerly belonged to the Nihon Credit Bank.

“These are the blueprints and designs for a building we’re going to put up. If all goes well, it should be built in 2001. The second-floor basement will connect to the subway, the first floor will have things like convenience stores and cafés, half of it will be offices, and we’ll also have the headquarters for my fund there. The rest will become high-class suites for Keika Hotels. The very top floor will act as both my office and my estate. The roof will have a green space and a garden, built just for me and to my *exact* specifications. Since I’ll be making this my estate, I’m hoping to have a party once it’s finished.”

I’d told the architectural company what I wanted and was more than satisfied with the design they came back with.

“Does that mean the Moonlight Fund is at the center of all of this? Not the Keika Group?” Yuujirou-kun queried.

“That’s right. It’s my house. Don’t you think I should take responsibility for it?”

Mitsuya-kun was the last to voice his questions, after he counted all the zeroes on the quote. “Who will be paying the tens of billions in operating expenses when you’re the actual owner of the Moonlight Fund?”

Hadn’t these boys heard of equivalent exchange? All these insightful questions, and they weren’t offering anything in return…but I supposed that manga hadn’t been written yet.

Instead of making a retort, I used a girl’s most powerful weapon to shut them up—her smile.

“Do you think you can surpass this, Teia?”

“It certainly looks difficult,” Yuujirou-kun agreed.

“If someone like Runa can pull this kinda stuff off, I can too.”

I liked his spirit and hoped I could have the same attitude—though he hadn't phrased his words in a particularly sensitive way. Eiichi-kun showed no concern for my feelings as he picked up his pen and turned back to his paper. I snatched it away before he could write anything on it.

"Runa! What are you doing?!"

"I'd rather you didn't write my name on there. You don't know how jealous girls can get."

Yuujirou-kun clapped his hands together, drawing Eiichi-kun's attention away from me. I was grateful for his thoughtful intervention.

"I have noticed Keikain-san speaking to several girls recently, so I agree you ought to be careful. Perhaps you should write 'To surpass those entrepreneurs who have gone before me'?"

"Oh, right. Sure, I'll put that."

I passed the Eiichi-kun's paper back to him, and he wrote down Yuujirou-kun's suggestion. Once he was done, I turned my attention to Yuujirou-kun's paper.

"What will you write, Yuujirou-kun?"

"It's a little run-of-the-mill, but I'm wishing that my family gets on well."

Yuujirou-kun's family situation had already changed compared to the game, and at the moment there was no strife between him and his brother. I had no idea what was in store for his future anymore.

"What are you going to write, Keikain?"

I lifted my gaze to the ceiling for just a second before making my decision. It was a wish I knew would not come true. In a way, that made it the perfect dream, and the only thing I could write.

"That the four of us can keep having fun."

***

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

Catan: the board game *The Settlers of Catan*. Resources are determined by the rolling of two dice. Rolls of ten or three tend to cause huge excitement, as they are rarer than rolling sixes and eights.

Retail and Wholesale: retail describes sales to individual small and medium companies, whereas wholesale describes sales to large enterprises and public institutions.

Indian Film: *Muthu.*

Mitsuya-kun's Book: *Boogiepop and Others* by Kouhei Kadono. Published by KADOKAWA.

Runa's Book: *Maria-sama ga Miteru (Maria Watches Over Us)* by Oyuki Konno. Published by Shueisha.

Beethoven's Ninth: Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in Four Movements, *Ode to Joy.* You often hear it in Japan around the end of the year.

Old Year, New Year: A program shown on NHK starting at a quarter to midnight on New Year's Eve. If you leave the TV on after watching *Kouhaku Uta Gassen*, the annual televised singing contest, you will find yourself watching Old Year, New Year.

Shooting Game: RayStorm.

Fighting Game: Street Fighter.

Strip Mahjong Game: Super Real Mahjong PV. A long-running arcade series that's also famous for its ruthless difficulty.

Pork-barrel Politicians: Dietmen who act as go-betweens between specific government offices and lobbying groups. They like

to boast of having the same level of expertise as bureaucrats, but their activities are also a breeding ground for collusive relationships.

Chapter 5:
Heisei's Queen of the Railway
Izumikawa's Regime

BEETHOVEN'S SYMPHONY NO. 9. IN D MINOR—a common piece to hear near the end of the year in Japan, and the piece I was presently singing at the center of a concert hall. I was persuaded to do so by one of Japan's top-class conductors—who also performed on the world stage—and I couldn't refuse. Watching me on the big stage from his box seat was Prime Minister Fuchigami. He said this was thanks for my bailout of Hizen Co. Ltd., a hypermarket belonging to DK Bank, which was struggling with end-of-year cash flow problems.

I'd never intended to buy it, but it was set to be sacrificed to hurry along the settlement of DK Bank's bad debts before the three-way merger, and then there was the fact that it still had stores in Hokkaido, whose financial circle was asking me to save it. I couldn't ignore them.

The plan was to get the hypermarket's current debts to the banks, including DK Bank, waived, and then take out a loan from those banks to deal with its approximately four hundred billion yen in bad debts. Hizen would also be moved under the umbrella of the Teisei Department Stores Group, its stores reorganized, and employees deployed to its convenience stores as part of a restoration plan.

During the standing ovation after my performance, Prime Minister Fuchigami made to stand up, but stumbled. He played it off as a joke and waved at me before applauding. It reminded me of the future.

Once the curtain was down, I turned down the invitation to the after-party, and instead whispered to Tachibana.

"Get Vice President Izumikawa on the phone *at once*."

Unless we acted, Prime Minister Fuchigami's life was in danger.

January 2.

Yesterday, computer engineers the world over breathed a sigh of relief that the famed Y2K scare hadn't happened. Today, Vice President Izumikawa rang me.

"Happy New Year, Vice President Izumikawa."

"Happy New Year, Your Little Majesty. Allow me to get straight to the point. As per your urgent request, Prime Minister Fuchigami went to the hospital. The doctor ordered his retirement. It appears he has suffered a stroke."

I didn't know whether to be pleased that we'd saved him in time or upset that this was how his time in power ended. For a while, I stayed silent.

"He said he wanted to thank you. Would you be able to stop by the hospital when you have the time? There is something I'd like to discuss with you there too."

No doubt he wanted my opinion on his inheritance of the premiership. I wasn't impressed that he wanted a grade-schooler's opinion on the matter, but I was the one who had given Vice President Izumikawa his position. I accepted that I held some responsibility in these matters.

"Very well. I shall discuss things with you there."

Health problems during a politician's career were lethal. That was why the vice president himself had been called to the hospital. Keeping the prime minister hospitalized while doing everything possible to keep it from the media was like something out of a spy novel—not that I pointed that out.

"Thank you for coming. Everybody's here now," Vice President Izumikawa greeted me in the waiting room.

All of his other guests looked at Tachibana and me. There were six politicians in attendance: Secretary-General Hayashi, Chairman Tsurui of the Policy Research Council, the Chair of the House of Councilors Committee Murashita, Acting Secretary-General Nonaka, and Chief Cabinet Secretary Akagi. These seven *karou* (if we included Tachibana) looked at me as though trying to appraise me. I was confident that the men occupying these positions knew exactly who I was.

"I'll take her through to see the prime minister."

"Wait for me here, Tachibana."

"Of course, my lady."

I followed Vice President Izumikawa to the prime minister's room. Tachibana could deal with the mundane political talk.

Prime Minister Fuchigami was up in his bed. He looked better than I'd expected.

"Thank you for coming, Your Little Majesty. Have a seat. There's grape juice for you in that fridge."

"Thank you. I'm glad to see you seem in better health than I expected," I said, helping myself to the juice.

"You have my immense gratitude. On this occasion, however, I would like to be allowed a *complaint*." Though there was amusement in his tone, I could see in his eyes that he was very serious. Prime Minister Fuchigami had a chronic heart disease, and his exhausting work as prime minister and party president had worsened his health. That stumble at the concert was a transient ischemic attack, a warning sign of a stroke—but the decision to bring him to the hospital was in part taken because of his chronic heart disease. There was no way he could continue leading his party in this state.

"You know I bought Hizen Co. Ltd. for this very reason. I'd considered it an expensive purchase, but I won't now that I know it has saved your life, Prime Minister Fuchigami."

Both Prime Minister Fuchigami and Vice President Izumikawa smiled at my subtle joke. Properly taking care of yourself was a surefire way of reducing your likelihood of an early death. Prime Minister Fuchigami had been steadily cutting his life short by overworking himself.

"Stop that. Talking, being prepared, and all that sweetness. All things females do *infinitely* better than us menfolk." Vice President Izumikawa chuckled.

"Indeed. It's a real shame though. If only I'd lasted a little longer…but now my efforts have come to nothing. It's really frustrating." Prime Minister Fuchigami sighed.

After the crushing defeats during the House of Councilors election, he'd only just won the election for prime minster in Fall last year. Prime Minister Fuchigami had been up against former General-Secretary Katou Kazuhiro and Yamaguchi Takumi—former chair of the Policy Research Council. The election was nothing short of an all-out war, no longer a civil battle of subtly making insinuations about one's opponent. That election had left serious rifts within the party, but with Prime Minister Fuchigami's approval ratings on the rise, he was on the verge of commanding a long-lasting regime. Not only that, but the negotiations for a coalition to gain a majority within the House of Councilors were starting to look promising—at the very moment when Prime Minister Fuchigami was forced to quit. I couldn't bear to bring all that up.

"I assume you wish to speak to Her Little Majesty afterward, but for now I want you, the vice president, to take over the administration and the party. As for my successor and the next prime minister…have you got anyone in mind?"

Vice President Izumikawa was granted his role after his work as Minister of Finance. The new Minister of Finance was a former prime minister and treated accordingly; at times like these, parties and

governments would stay calm, spending their time solidifying their picks for future vice presidents and deputy prime ministers.

I was more concerned by the fact they'd decided to have this incredibly dreary conversation in the presence of a sweet, young girl. There was no way I could excuse myself at this point.

"I would be lying if I said I wasn't interested in the position myself—but I can see that it's going to end up a caretaker government." Vice President Izumikawa gazed at me. Thanks to my activities up till now, both he and Prime Minister Fuchigami treated me as an equal. "This is why I summoned you, small kingmaker. Should I be the next prime minister?"

"Isn't this a decision you should make with everyone out in the waiting room?"

"Politics is more than just lip service. These decisions need to be made in a locked room to avoid causing offense. Of the people in said locked room, it is those with the money who hold the most sway. I need your opinion, otherwise they won't be able to approve me as their leader."

Prime Minister Fuchigami smiled, and there was something almost *masochistic* about the gesture. "Your father and the prime minister who taught me both knew what they were getting into was dirty, and yet they couldn't pass up the money. This country could not be at peace if they had known that your father thought he was making citizens happy through his actions. I wanted to let you know."

I nodded quietly. As long as things were settled quietly by the rich and powerful, no one would get upset. This country had functioned because the economy kept growing, and it had its socialist enemies in the east. But then the bubble burst, and there was no longer enough money circulating to keep people satisfied.

Therein lay the reason for Prime Minister Fuchigami and his faction's future decline.

"I'll fully admit I used you. But I didn't want you to be subpoenaed. I just want you to remember that, should you be planning to follow the same path as your grandfather."

He must have been referring to Nakamaro-oniisama's testimony to the House of Councilors as an unsworn witness, and how that had exposed him to the media. I wasn't sure how to respond in this moment.

"It sounds as though you're making that your final message to her," Vice President Izumikawa teased.

"Something like that. I am passing on, as a politician, regardless." Prime Minister Fuchigami smiled, finally clearing the air of its tension.

I understood now why these two wanted me here. I was grateful for their consideration—and their profound regret, which had been all too clear for much of the conversation.

"Now let's get back to business. Keikain Runa-kun, would you support me if I were to become the next prime minister?" Vice President Izumikawa looked me straight in the eye. In his gaze I saw the true intimidating aura of a politician.

These two both surprised me today. I had the sense Prime Minister Fuchigami felt that he could make a comeback if he stepped down here. And he openly said he had used me. As such, I was allowed to be the victim—up until this moment, at least.

From this point on, things would be quite different. Prime Minister Fuchigami hadn't wanted to subpoena me, but the possibility was back on the table now, as was the chance I would be treated as a criminal. I closed my eyes, focusing on the choice that lay before me. Or rather, I let my previous life—and my past in this current life—make the decision for me.

"It's about time you asked me that," I began. "Did you really think I would be heartless enough to say no?"

It was only because of Vice President Izumikawa's position as Minister of Finance that my work eliminating all those bad debts had gone so smoothly—much more than I could have ever expected. Because stock prices were higher than they "should" have been—thus enabling the use of unrealized gains to deal with bad debts worth several hundred billion, or even trillions, of yen—the process had been much easier than in the history of the world I previously knew.

Now we were stumbling into unchartered territory, but I was determined to keep going. I already knew the worst-case scenario from my previous life.

"Hold a general election this July. That will likely be the end of the line for you. The people still haven't forgotten about the Ministry of Finance scandal, and banks are still being criticized for their bad debts. The Ministry is suffering even more for being the organization in charge of them. If you still wish to be prime minister despite all of that, then I will continue to support you from the shadows."

"What about the party leadership election before that?"

"It will be impossible to win. Should the opposition put out a motion of no confidence, you run the risk of fringe factions siding with them. You don't want the opposition scouting for a leader of their choice if a mass resignation means the Diet needs to nominate a new prime minister. I suggest you declare yourself a caretaker

government, but not allow the leadership election before July. That way, you should be able to pass the six months safely."

In the previous party leadership election, Prime Minister Fuchigami had managed to completely cut out the fringe factions. I had no idea what those fringe factions were planning next. That was why it was better to buy time until the general election over six months away and deal a decisive blow then.

"I don't think it should be too difficult to win reelection with the support of the main factions," Prime Minister Fuchigami said, as though he found my suggestion strange.

"Those main factions will split," I told him decisively. "Also, do you really think *he* would let such an opportunity go to waste in the first place?"

Both Prime Minister Fuchigami and Vice President Izumikawa fell silent. The man I spoke of was the prime minister's coalition partner, a man who once held the same values as him but later went on to utterly betray him. He was praised as a highly capable politician, making him a fearsome foe in any election or political situation. He would see this entire thing as divine intervention for his benefit.

Though I didn't mention it here, and although he had already held the position once, despite all his power and influence, Vice President Izumikawa was cutting ahead of someone else in line for the premiership. I knew that, but I had trouble working out the cause.

"While I have you, I would like to ask: why did you not support Katou-kun?" Prime Minister Fuchigami looked at me with the sternest expression I'd seen so far. I never *had* spoken to him about that; I'd left that all up to Tachibana.

"I just didn't get in contact with him. Nor he with me."

If I had to guess, it was probably his way of retaliating against the Keikain House. He may have apologized for what happened with my father, but that didn't mean he was able to outright forgive him. I didn't know whether he didn't make contact after that or if it just never got through, but either way, the Keikain family did not support him in the all-important leadership election.

"It was also important for the vice president to support you, Prime Minister Fuchigami. It was that support which helped move the processing of all those bad debts along."

Becoming vice president was akin to becoming a hostage. If Prime Minister Fuchigami had lost the leadership election, Vice President Izumikawa would have also had no choice but to resign from his role. Though given that supporting both Katou and Izumikawa was essentially impossible, there was perhaps no need for me to get in contact with Katou-san in the first place.

"I see. To you, we're important allies in solving the bad debt crisis, but from your perspective, anybody would be fine as long as they can help you achieve that goal." Prime Minister Fuchigami looked amused.

"That's right," I replied lightly, giving him a sweet smile of my own, "which is why I'm relying on *you* to win the next general election."

We all laughed, then Vice President Izumikawa clapped his hands together. He had made up his mind as a politician. This may not have been the best circumstances under which to gain power, but he was going to do it nonetheless.

"Very well. I shall step up to the prime minister's seat, and my premiership will come to an end after six months. I suppose I'll give a ministerial seat to whoever is looking to boost their prestige." Having prepared himself for the worst, Vice President Izumikawa turned to Prime Minister Fuchigami. What they were about to say to each

other was, in my mind, very cool—but I wasn't about to admit it. "Thank you for all your hard work up until now. Have a nice long rest, and make sure you recover properly."

"I hope you're looking forward to me telling you the exact same thing in six months' time."

That afternoon, it was publicly announced that Prime Minister Fuchigami and his cabinet were to step down from their positions due to the prime minister's illness. An extraordinary Diet session was called for the following week to vote for his replacement. Vice President Izumikawa and the deputy prime minister managed to rally the party and government in that time, and it was at that session that Prime Minister Izumikawa was born.

At that day's press conference, the new prime minister announced there would be a general election held in July, once the current Diet session had finished, and he made it clear that his cabinet was intended to be a caretaker government only.

A violent storm of political realignment loomed on the horizon.

"Prime Minister Izumikawa had made a shocking choice for his caretaker cabinet. He has chosen former Welfare Minister Koizumi Souichirou as the Fellowship of Constitutional Government's secretary-general. This selection is being seen as an olive branch toward the fringe factions which were treated with disapproval during the Fuchigami regime.

While a fierce battle raged between former Prime Minister Fuchigami and former Secretary-General Katou during the recent party leadership election, former Welfare Minister Koizumi did not side with Secretary-General Katou out of consideration for the Hayashi Faction to which he belongs. While making a clear statement in itself, there are rumors among those close to the situation that it was a plot to distance himself from the former secretary-general.

Furthermore, former Welfare Minister Koizumi was chosen despite the fact that Izumikawa's cabinet has several politicians waiting for their turn as minister. His selection was likely part of an attempt to create a sense of national unity before the summer's general election.

Nagatachou is already looking forward to the period after the general election; as a show of impartiality, Prime Minister Izumikawa has resigned as head of his faction, and that position will automatically be handed down to former Secretary-General Katou. The post-election period looks set to be a struggle between him and previous Secretary-General Hayashi Gakuto, leader of the Hayashi faction who has the support of former Prime Minister Fuchigami…"

"We'll pay for all of it, so please work to keep things moving."

"Very well. I'm only in this seat for six months, so make use of me however you like."

Under Prime Minister Izumikawa's caretaker government, all policy progress appeared to come to a halt. Fortunately, one of them—relating to diplomacy—was still progressing. It was the contract renewal for the Hinomaru oil field on the Persian Gulf, which was coming to the end of its term. The Saudi Arabian government had asked for the construction of a two hundred billion yen mine railway as a condition of the extension, but Japan had refused.

"Will you be able to recover the cost?" Prime Minister Izumikawa asked me over the phone.

The Akamatsu Corporation, a subsidiary of the Keika Group, was already managing imports of Russian crude oil, which was soon to reach 10 percent of Japan's crude oil imports. That was, however, creating an unfortunate dependence on Russian oil, which was incredibly cheap. I was wagering that the Hinomaru oil field would be important to secure resources in the Middle East.

“It will be difficult, but I think this is worth it given the delicate political situation in Russia.”

It was heavy oil with a high sulfur content, but coming from the Hinomaru field, it was symbolic. According to Toudou, who was the one to broach this subject, one’s reputation as a player in the resource industry mattered more than profit and power.

“I would like to make my investment dependent upon bringing the exploration company under the Akamatsu Corporation. Could I ask you to bring the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry on board?”

“Yes, I’ll do that. As for the negotiations themselves, I’ll leave that to your corporation’s Toudou-kun, and then have the ministries tidy up the overall presentation at the end. I thought my cabinet wouldn’t achieve anything, so it’s nice to know I’m contributing to something.”

“It’s due to the times we live in. You won’t be in power for long, but let us both work hard so that your cabinet is remembered as something positive. Goodbye for now.” I put down the phone and looked at the three men present: Toudou, Tachibana, and Ichijou. At this point, my investments in IT had blown up, as had the money I was making from the Russian government bonds I still possessed. I could afford to let go of two hundred billion yen without worry.

“I have the prime minister’s approval. We’re financing the entire project.”

“I know I told you it was possible, but you certainly made a swift decision there, my lady.” Toudou looked back at me, exasperated.

I put my hands on my hips. “There wasn’t much time. It was a decision that *needed* to be made quickly.”

The oil field lay between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and half of its moneymaking abilities were set to disappear in February 2000. If we had more time than that, we might have been able to haggle a

little—but we didn't have such luxuries. Our only choice was to eat the entire cost.

"I'd like this to be paid for from the Moonlight Fund," I said sweetly.

"Certainly. It's hard to believe, but ever since getting involved in your schemes, such price tags don't faze me anymore…" Ichijou grumbled. He was the one who would do the purchasing itself, while Tachibana and Toudou handled negotiations. There was no way *to* pay without Ichijou, so this was very much like a child begging their parents to buy them a new toy. The only difference was the vast amounts of money involved, and the fact that the child was the one who earned it.

"By the way, Ichijou, since choosing you as Keika Holdings' leader, I haven't heard you say anything about hiring anyone. The company starts up in spring, you know."

The ban on bank holdings companies had finally been lifted, and Keika Holdings was now set to launch operations as the first company of its kind since the ban. And yet Ichijou had said nothing about hiring anybody for the banks, brokers, and insurance companies that it would possess.

"I didn't want to invertedly start a game of professional musical chairs. I come from a second regional bank and would be pushed out. It is only the fact that the head of a holdings company is more of a figurehead than anything that I was able to make the transition so smoothly." Ichijou smiled at me wryly. There were several former officials from the Ministry of Finance and elite metropolitan bankers among Keika Holdings' companies, and yet I'd personally chosen the former manager of a second-tier regional bank to take the throne. It was natural that some of them would be dissatisfied—or even jealous.

“Without fully understanding why, I find myself in charge of an entire holding company. What options are available to me now?”

“Reorganization and reshuffling…” I muttered.

“Weren’t we in dire need of reshuffling after the mergers of Keika Bank and Keika Securities? And once we start managing the various insurance companies, personnel changes and managing our locations will become much easier. It will also become easier to help ailing financial institutions when they come to us for aid.”

I clapped a fist to my hand in realization. Ichijou, Toudou and even Tachibana smiled somewhat uneasily at me.

“So you *are* still hoping to rescue struggling companies, my lady.”

“Of course. I haven’t finished my tasks. I’ve barely even started clearing all these bad debts.”

Tachibana, Ichijou, and Toudou all grimaced.

“This middle-eastern oil field will also be vital to my efforts, and I want you all to understand that.” I waited until all three of them nodded, and then I smiled. “I’ll ask you to check in with the government, Tachibana. Toudou, you head to Saudi Arabia and explain things over there. Oh, yes!”

I clapped my fist against my palm again and expressed an incidental desire. “About this railway—please make sure that we’re in charge of it. Spend whatever you need to have a decent railway ready within two or three years. You can manage that, yes?”

I was referring to the mine railway which Saudi Arabia had requested. Its cargo route was to run along the southern border of Iraq. While constructing that connecting line would put us in the red, the line would soon make profit, before the eventual Iraq war would wipe it out. I hoped it wouldn’t happen, and yet I found myself preparing for the worst—something that threatened to push me into a pit of self-loathing.

"The government has announced a deal with Saudi Arabia to extend the contract for its stake in the Hinomaru Oil Field for another thirty years. Experts have struggled to hide their surprise in the wake of the last-minute agreement, made just before the contract's expiration. At the heart of the negotiations was a request by the Saudi Arabian government for two hundred billion yen to construct a mine railway, which appeared to halt any progress as the Japanese government was initially hesitant. The Akamatsu Corporation, a subsidiary of the Keika Group, declared that it would pay the entire cost of the railway, allowing both parties to come to a sudden agreement.

It seemed the temporary Izumikawa regime had given up on being able to strike a deal until the very last moment, and there are some within the government claiming that this is a signal that the current regime is looking to extend its activities to after the upcoming general election."

"It has been announced that the oil field development in the Persian Gulf is to undergo a third-party allocation of shares and be turned over to the Akamatsu Corporation, a subsidiary of the Keika Group. The consistently profitable oil field sits on the border between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Recent negotiations between the Japanese and Saudi Arabian governments had run into trouble. The sticking point was a two hundred million yen mine railway requested by Saudi Arabia, which the Akamatsu Corporation recently stepped in to pay for, allowing negotiations to succeed. To unify the oil field's operation, it has been decided that it will be taken over by the Akamatsu Corporation, with many related parties seeing the decision as an act of gratitude toward the general trading company.

Furthermore, the Akamatsu Corporation has announced that it is to establish a mine railway corporation with the Saudi Arabian government, and that it will lead the railway's management and construction. The first project is a railway between Dammam

and Hafar Al Batin, which will run alongside the construction of a branch line to King Khalid Military City…"

"The first bank holding company since the lifting of the ban, Keika Holdings, is set to begin operations this spring and has now officially announced its executive staff. Ichijou Susumi, the company's managing director, has chosen personnel that have sent shockwaves through related parties. CEO Ichijou worked at the former second regional bank, Far Eastern Bank, before becoming a corporate officer at Keika Bank, making him a rather surprising choice for this role. Those close to the situation claim that the decision was based on the wishes of the Keikain family, who own the company…"

While the rest of society was busy celebrating the start of the new millennium, the government had been plunged into chaos. Time, however, continued to march forward. The country's larger banks were finally starting anew following the burst of the bubble, and I was making some purchases behind the scenes. I turned on the TV at just the right time to catch some relevant news.

"Kyomei Bank is to become a part of Keika Holdings after a deal to bail it out. There has been a mass resignation amongst Kyomei's board of executives, and those found to have been involved with corruption have been prosecuted for their actions. Those who turned themselves in and cooperated with the investigation received lighter punishments, such as house arrest or fines. The source of funds for the bailout comes from the Moonlight Fund's selling of its shares in the technology industry, so the transaction does not involve public funds…"

"Nice work, Ichijou."

“Thank you, my lady. But are you certain that choosing to sell so many of our shares was the right decision?”

“It was. It’s for the best, seeing as the dot-com bubble is soon to burst. Once that happens, we can get involved with short selling and make even more profit.”

Ichijou’s expression grew taut. He must have been balking at the idea of them making even *more* money.

The TV program changed to the next story—this one was also about the Keika Group.

“In that case, I shall purchase whatever you wish, my lady.”

Our attorney was shaking hands with the head of the local government as cameras flashed around them.

“Kanto’s semi-public railway, the KYOSHO Rapid Railway Company, has been purchased by the Moonlight Fund for one hundred billion yen. The railway connects the Tokyo area with Chiba…”

KYOSHO’s line connected directly to Tokyo’s subway, making it a decent investment. During the bubble, the price of land, labor, building, and everything else needed for construction jumped in cost. The company covered these costs by taking out loans with huge interest rates (interests rates were very high during the bubble), meaning it just kept getting pushed further and further into the red. We were buying the entire company as its debt, which we would pay off all at once with our massive financial reserves, meaning it would be easier to start making a profit.

The local government was clearly apprehensive about passing a railway over to a suspicious fund, but they ultimately felt better once I made a point of starting up the “Keika Railway” company, and anyway, I was freeing them of a hundred billion yen debt. We also

announced we'd be lowering the company's expensive fares—previously relied on to help pay the interest on the company's debt—which won us support from our customer base. Finally, it was also agreed that the contract the company already had to extend to a further subway station would be maintained.

The railway's customers kept increasing year after year, and even with the investment costs, we were set to make a few billion yen revenue over the upcoming year—a huge benefit.

"This purchase ties in perfectly with our plan for Sougou Department Stores."

"Hm?" Ichijou, who was going through the negotiations to purchase the department store chain, inclined his head, so I began to explain. It was a trick I would never have noticed had I not watched the presenters of a certain Hokkaido TV show go around the eighty-eight temples of Shikoku.

"Shikoku's Kagawa Railroad depends on the Sougou department store at its main terminal for its revenue, so much so that it even guarantees the department stores' loans."

Regional railways were often the cornerstone of their area's economy, and if one were to collapse, it was hard to say just how many more companies in the region would go bankrupt as a result. It was about more than just somebody eating some udon, getting inspired to visit Kagawa, and then checking the map and finding out there was a Sougou department store there to seal the deal. At least, that was what I hoped.

"I wish to bail out Kagawa Railroad too. The public is more likely to trust me if I have a railway company under my belt already."

Keika Holdings had been holding private merger negotiations to rescue Sougou Department Stores from its financial troubles, but a simple merger between it and Teisei Department Stores would likely bring down the latter due to Sougou's huge debts. That was why

negotiations were focused on getting Sougou's lenders to agree to a debt waiver.

The banks were reluctant; I could see them going to Kagawa, Sougou's guarantor, to retrieve a part of those debts, something that was likely to lead to Kagawa Railroad's collapse. That made it vital to bail out both Sougou Department Stores and Kagawa Railroad at the same time, which meant it was going to be a repeat of the purchase of KYOSHO Rapid Railway—a suspicious fund stepping up to purchase this railway company. I wanted to avoid that, which was why Keika Railway would be the company to purchase Kagawa Railroad instead.

Motorization may have been seen as a superficial goal, but it was an essential part of the zaibatsu both before and after the war. By holding a railway company with the Keika name, I was signalling that I intended to hold direct control over my own businesses should the Keika Group get swallowed up by another zaibatsu—such as the Iwazaki Group.

"I see. So that is why you chose Tachibana-san as the managing director for Keika Railway."

"Tachibana volunteered himself when I told him I was buying a railway company. I'm sure it was for the same reasons though."
I smiled back at Ichijou awkwardly.

If things continued as they were, it wouldn't be long before the central companies of the Keika Group, Keika Pharmaceuticals and Keika Chemicals, would end up merging into the Iwazaki Group, at which point Keika Holdings would be placed on the public stock market—and we would lose that too. We needed to establish a new business core for our companies focused on Keika Hotels and Keika Railway, away from the "suspicious" Moonlight Fund, before that happened. And there was nothing like a railway to build confidence in those core businesses.

“For a hundred billion yen purchase, would it not have been better to source the money from Keika Holdings rather than the Moonlight Fund?”

“That decision all comes down to the debt.” I showed Ichijou a map. I couldn’t tell whether his smile came from dark amusement or exasperation.

“The Shin-Tokiwa Railway Company?”

“I’m going to pay for the Tokyo extension. Don’t you think it would be good to connect these two via the subway?”

The Shin-Tokiwa Railway Company had invested over a trillion yen into the construction of the expansion before running out of money, leaving it with a temporary terminus of Akihabara station while construction to the intended terminus of Tokyo station remained incomplete. Footing the *entire* bill would be a little much, but if I could pay for the extension just to Tokyo, it would hugely boost the line’s convenience. The cost for the Tokyo extension alone was around a hundred billion yen, but if I wanted to extend it to the subway on top of that, I’d be looking at around three hundred billion yen overall. That wasn’t exactly a cheap investment, and that was before we got to buying any more railway companies outright.

“Wait a moment. Didn’t one of our companies apply for corporate rehabilitation?”

“Far Eastern Developments did, yes. It’s a developer with experience in regional resorts and is currently undergoing the rehabilitation process.”

“Let’s join it up with a general contractor in rehabilitation and reform the whole thing.”

Japan’s railway industry earned its revenue by creating links between city centers and the suburbs, and by turning those suburbs into residential land. Hence, Japan’s private railway companies always held real-estate companies at the same time, and the only

reason they managed to survive the unusually hard blow the bubble's burst delt them was because of the money they made running their trains over passenger capacity on a daily basis. Buying a railway company meant we could build a large-scale complex—including a supermarket—at its entrance, and a parking lot big enough to compete with a park-and-ride system. Said supermarket would of course belong to Teisei Department Stores, and there would be space for a cinema complex too—but I was getting off track.

"Have you got any ideas yourself, my lady?"

"Yes, but it's a little risky. I want a Shinkansen."

Using the massive construction budget to build a Shinkansen—a bullet train—was sure to cause a storm both in the Diet and among the populations living in the city to all the way out in the country. Launching the project now would provide good support for the brand-new Izumikawa administration because it wasn't as expensive a venture as a purely countryside-based public works project.

"A Shinkansen line from Okayama to Takamatsu. The Great Seto Bridge is built to support a Shinkansen, meaning construction to those two stations will be good to focus on for now. I'm thinking we allocate around four hundred billion yen for the budget. Maybe I should buy a general contractor myself to recover the construction costs..."

This was also linked to my desire to purchase Kagawa Railroad. Provincial cities were going to become difficult to maintain thanks to the combination of an ageing population and a declining birth rate. Therefore, a Shinkansen line directly connecting Tokyo to Osaka was by no means a bad idea. Either way, I'd already decided to purchase a general contractor that was undergoing rehabilitation and focused on developments. There were several general contractors with the technology to build something as fast as a Shinkansen train that

attempted to get involved with real estate during the bubble and ended up bankrupt. If this was going to cost money, I might as well pay my own companies to do it. That would also make it easier to pay out of my own pocket for more construction work in the future.

"I do wonder whether this Shikoku Shinkansen will make you any money."

"I'm confident that it will beat out the competition from aviation."

The Shinkansen would take less than four hours to go from Tokyo to Takamatsu, making it quicker than traveling by airplane. Going by plane also meant travel to the airport, and travel to your destination on the other side, adding a lot more time than that. With a railway, you had the convenience of going directly from city center to city center. Extending our Shinkansen line to Tokyo probably wouldn't be possible, in which case we'd start it at Shin-Osaka station and ask them to build more platforms there accordingly.

Our real problem was our competing, non-Shinkansen train lines which—if the worst happened—I wasn't against buying out if I had to. I was already getting my hands on Kagawa Railroad; it wouldn't be a bad idea to have more connections in freight, including railway-based freight. I was confident I would be able to buy out Shikoku's privatized national railway if I wanted to go that far, though it was in the red.

"This is…quite something."

"I know! I want this one the most—but it's *far* from a cheap investment," I said with a sigh.

I was showing him a plan to build a Shinkansen in Hokkaido. It would travel from Asahikawa to Sapporo and as far as Hakodate. The estimated budget for the project came to more than two trillion yen—a price tag I did *not* want to pay alone.

“Please pardon the interruption, my lady, but your purchase of a certain company has gone through.” Tachibana appeared with a document in his hand, which he passed to me.

“Which company would that be?” Ichijou asked.

“Dog Express. It cost me one hundred forty billion yen. I’m having Toudou and the Akamatsu Corporation manage it. I really wanted a large-scale transportation company to strengthen the logistics side of our supermarkets, department stores, and convenience stores.”

Dog Express itself had been struggling due to overinvestment, but I had acquired it as part of my plan to deliver fresh Hokkaido foods to department stores and supermarkets all over the country. It hadn’t cost me too much either. Next in line was the Sougou merger, followed by buying out Sachii once its corporate rehabilitation was done. It would be difficult to go after anything bigger after that. If anything, it would have to be the Taiei, a nationwide supermarket holding debts close to three trillion yen—and one of the top players when it came to logistics.

“I suppose this puts a temporary stop to my plans to build a Shinkansen line.”

Even I was aware of how absurd the statement sounded out of context, but Tachibana and Ichijou were kind enough not to say anything.

Streets where store after store were out of business were a common sight all over Japan’s countryside.

“I hope you can see how the shopping districts and large-scale supermarkets and department stores are positioned differently out here. Combined with the restructuring of Teisei Department Stores, we may just be adding fuel to the fire.”

Ichijou's explanation was extremely unwelcome. Motorization had completely changed the composition of your average town. Department stores were where the fashion and culture of a town originated. Supermarkets were a hub for the area's lifestyle, where citizens stopped to feed and clothe themselves. But if a shopping district clashed with either of those, it would be the supermarket. During the fifties and sixties in urban areas, it was normal for big department stores to be built by the station to attract customers, and for stores to line the roads those customers took to get home, making it convenient just to pop in and do some shopping on the way.

Since cars became more widespread, that had changed. Commuting in the countryside had gotten more difficult, and more people switched to traveling via car, meaning those shopping streets saw less foot traffic. And when people started using their cars for shopping, larger supermarkets were built in suburban areas where there was room for a parking lot, cutting people—and hence customers—off from the shopping districts completely. The result was what we were looking at now: in the countryside, those department stores by the stations were also closing since fewer people were commuting by train.

"I already thought this would be difficult. Seeing it in person really makes it hit home."

"Since your plans involve urban development, they also need to be approved by the local government and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry."

Ichijou's additional comment didn't make me feel any better. Supermarkets could buy items in bulk and sell them quickly for minimal profit. A row of individual stores on a shopping street could not compete when it came to purchase price.

"There's an even bigger problem."

“There’s more?!”

I could deal with the problems we’d already covered. I hadn’t expected *more*.

“Most shopping districts also have people residing in them. *That* is our problem.”

“How so?”

Ichijou began to explain. As the truth dawned on me, I buried my face in my hands.

“In a shopping district, stores tend to double as their owners’ houses. Even if a store is forced to close, the owner can continue to live in the building. You might find you have some trouble finding empty stores to rent out.”

Tachibana spoke next and delivered the final blow. It had me laying my face down on the desk in front of me. “Several of these shopping districts suffered from land sharks aggressively buying up the properties during the bubble. I doubt what you are proposing will sound palatable to those still living there.”

I could see that it was an impossible task. But I still wanted to do *something*.

“How are things looking with Teisei’s focus switching to convenience stores?”

“Our convenience stores are growing in number, but since the plan involves a lot of job rotation, we are lagging behind other companies. Logistics networks are everything when it comes to these stores, and we are relying heavily on trucks, which is slowing things down.”

“If we can buy products in bulk, the cost will be lower. Which means we have to buy as much as we can…”

I pondered the men’s words. We could bulk buy and lower our prices by making use of the logistical network Teisei used for both its

supermarkets and convenience stores. That meant our only problems now were parking lots and the aforementioned residents of shopping districts.

"Let's build a parking lot and convenience store close to the entrance of the shopping district. These stores will be jointly owned by those in the district. For that, we need to secure a parking lot nearby to make it work."

"If your plan is to rebuild the shopping district, then yes, you'll need a parking lot, but you should also think about building an apartment complex to gather the residents together. Don't forget about the local government and Chamber of Commerce and Industry. You have some groundwork to lay with them."

"I shall start up a partnership with the Imperial Freight Railway Company to continue expanding our freight depots. I understand that trucks can be convenient, but by partnering with a small local freight company, you can leave some profit for that region."

If I was going to go that far, I'd need government support.

"Due to the revision of the Large-Scale Retail Store Law, we're going to be seeing more and more stores get built in suburban areas," Tachibana pointed out. "Can we really compete?"

"No. Our small tricks have nothing on their big, simple strategies."

But I was going to go ahead—this was part of a fight to allow Teisei Department Stores to retreat. We needed to do something about the wasted resources it was pouring into its department stores and supermarkets and shift focus to convenience stores. That being said, I didn't want to just cut out and abandon the former without a second thought. I knew what it was like to be abandoned like that from my previous life.

"Relying on trucks is going to hold us back thanks to eventual environmental problems and the rise of online shopping anyway," I

said. “Once that happens, making use of Japan’s vast rail network is going to be a much better option for all sorts of reasons. Twenty years. As long as we can keep up Teisei’s war of retreat for twenty years, we should be good.”

I said that, but even I didn’t know what was waiting for us after those twenty years. Nevertheless, I kept that fact to myself, instead delivering a confident bluff.

“I see. I think I’ve heard everything I need to.” Prime Minister Izumikawa placed my report (written by Ichijou and Tachibana) on the table and looked up at me. I came here with a request, and he was looking at me like he would an adult. “But do *you* understand, my lady? Redeveloping the station area in a suburban city isn’t going to come cheap, you know.”

“I can comfortably cover my share. You may claim as big a slice of the rest of the pie as you like.”

“Most people aren’t so shameless as to simply agree to that when speaking with a child.”

“But in this moment, you must. A lot of these cities depend on public works projects.”

Public work projects were the lifeblood of these suburban towns, and they were also suffering fatalities after soaring high during the bubble. Leaving them to suffer was not an option.

“All right. I’ll meet with the relevant members of the party and see what I can do.”

Connections: they were ever useful. Making use of them seemed to make anything possible.

Takamatsu City, Kagawa prefecture.

Famed for its udon, it regarded itself as the gateway to Shikoku, but the large-scale businesses there were struggling. That this one had been saved was notable, but now it needed restructuring.

"It's a shame the founders had to be purged. Just make sure the employees are thoroughly trained!"

Kagawa Railroad—its involvement in guaranteeing a loan for Sougou Department Stores had backfired when Sougou found itself in financial trouble. It was famous despite its amateurish business practices, but in the end, people complained of it being too corporate for a railway company. Training and systematic reshuffling were sorely needed within the company.

"Refresh the stations, bring in some new trains, and don't cheap out on safety. Make sure the bus subsidiary has plenty of connections with the trains as well."

This was at a time when more rural areas were expanding their roads and increasing the number of buses which went directly to the region's central towns. As a result, you often had the bizarre situation of a railway running next to a national highway where a bus, also belonging to the same railway company, ran alongside its trains. To avoid that, our strategy was to have buses go to nearby areas. We would use the convenience of having those buses right at the station, plus discounts to those changing from our trains, to attract passengers.

"My lady, the Shikoku Imperial Railway Company has been in touch. They would like to discuss the Shikoku Shinkansen with you."

I grimaced a little at Tachibana's news. The Shikoku Imperial Railway was broke but had made some revenue from the Great Seto Bridge. The Keika Group, which had no experience in railways but plenty of money, must have looked like a very gullible golden goose to them.

“Okay. We’ll make them manage it. In return, they can take me on as a major stockholder.”

My main focus was to bail out Sougou Department Stores; Kagawa Railroad was simply a necessary afterthought. Only *then* was I considering a Shikoku Shinkansen, which I wouldn’t have been against selling off at a reasonable price later. The Keika Group’s Shinkansen line was intended to belong to Kagawa Railroad, but we would allow West Japan Imperial Railway to run their Shinkansen trains on it too.

The advantages to our plan were few and far between, so the idea was to use the revenue from that line to pay for the use of the extra platforms at Shin-Osaka station.

“If they expand those expressways any further, Shikoku Imperial Railway is going to lose out to the buses too. If they’re going to make any money, it has to come from elsewhere.”

In the end, the partnership between Kagawa Railroad and Shikoku Imperial Railway went through, and there were no quarrels about the latter taking over management of the Shinkansen. Now it was time to get back to discussing Sougou’s restructuring.

After reviewing the financial state the company was in, Ichijou heaved a deep sigh. “We will be able to clear the current debts, but those we accumulate down the line are going to be much more difficult to deal with.”

The department store outside the main terminal had suffered from the region’s motorization, and its customers had been poached by a competing suburban shopping mall. Both Sougou and Teisei’s brand power as department stores were weak at just the wrong time for them to also lose out to first-rate stores in urban, car-accessible areas. Both businesses had imploded much like the bubble had. I’d already made the decision to move much of Sougou’s workforce to our convenience stores when I bailed it out too, but even then, we

would probably have to close the department stores like this one, positioned outside a station.

"The Matsuyama store will survive. Kouchi will probably have to go. Tokushima I think we can keep. Takamatsu…"

It was naively built during the bubble, but the building itself was nice, so it would be a shame to destroy it. I decided to take advantage of its position in front of the station and transform the upper floors into office space and an event hall.

"Ichijou. Worst-case scenario, how many stores will we have left?"

"We'll be down to around half of the regional stores."

Department stores that relied on the more rural areas for their survival were simply destined to sink with their surrounding areas. Customers who were after the fancy brands of a city department store would rather go there, perfectly happy to abandon the stores closer to home.

"We'll probably need those paper bags for our department stores for special occasions. It doesn't matter what gets sold in them."

During this period, those rural regions still observed the old customs of summer and year-end gifts, plus ceremonial occasions requiring specific items. It would be a good look to sell bags with mystery gifts in them related to those events, but as for what to put in them…

At least these odd, amusing problems I was faced with at the moment would become interesting anecdotes in the future.

"What? You mean we can just stock up on gifts for cheap at recycling stores and put *those* things in our lucky bags?"

Ichijou confirmed it with nothing more than a small smile. These bags were often the subjects of showrooms at regional department

stores, and apparently some of their most popular items. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"If that's true, how are we supposed to improve our stores?"

"We collaborate with television. We offer mail-order sales via television and use our delivery network to have those items delivered the next day. That way, we can secure customers and use the proceeds to stem our losses. The only other way I can think of is to attract customers via some sort of event."

"An event…"

And so I found myself singing on stage at the event hall in Takamatsu, in the building that was formerly a Sougou Department Store. Every seat had sold out, although that only amounted to a few hundred. When I was done singing, I headed backstage amidst the applause, along with the staff and the regional band members.

This was part of a concert tour that started in Tokushima, would end in Kobe and Shinsaibashi in Osaka, and stop by Kouchi, Matsuyama, and Takamatsu on the way. I suppose you could describe it as a pilgrimage of sorts, but I preferred to think of it as the journey through a living hell. We were allowed to use the Shikoku Shinkansen and AIRHO as our transportation. I was the star—rather, the easiest star to exploit to promote our stores. That said, I didn't mind making use of my image in this way if it meant getting us out of the red. We were also renting out our halls to the locals, having our opera company put on performances, and renting our stages for public theater—all kinds of things to attract customers to our stores.

"An excellent performance, my lady."

"Thank you. Next up is a flight to Tokyo, yes? I am rather exhausted."

"Would you like to stay overnight perhaps?" one of the staff members asked me.

I smiled awkwardly. There was a reason I had to return to Tokyo.

"Sorry, but I can't skip school."

"Are you ready, my lady?" Aki-san called to me, and I turned around from my position in front of the mirror.

I was wearing a yukata chosen by Keiko-san. Combined with my blonde hair, it gave me a very mysterious vibe.

"I'm ready! Does it suit me?"

Aki-san said nothing, instead switching on her video camera. There was my answer, apparently. Keiko-san, also in a yukata like me and Aki-san, smiled. The three of us were going to a night market tonight.

"Why are we going to a night market, again?" Aki-san asked once we were in the car.

This trip wasn't my idea; it was thanks from the shopping district.

"This is a place where my project to revitalize shopping districts has gone especially well," I replied. "They invited us to visit."

Said project, which made use of Teisei Department Stores' supermarkets, had given rise to several success stories. The first step was building convenience stores at those districts' entrances, and huge, multi-story parking lots in front of them. The empty spaces around the supermarkets made great "backyards" for the districts, where apartment buildings could be built as part of redevelopment. Then, to make sure the closed stores could restart their businesses and keep them running, I rented those apartments out for cheap and added a public event space to the area. The implementation of my ideas presented various problems which Prime Minister Izumikawa solved simply by putting his foot down several times, so I could see

this project being praised as a success of the Izumikawa Administration.

We arrived at the night market.

“Wow! There’s so much activity here!”

“It must be due to the authorities’ involvement in the redevelopment of this district right by the station. The access to a parking lot really makes all the difference.”

I’d built a large parking lot close to the station of the shopping district that ran alongside KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co.’s line, and all the customers who shopped in the district got a discount on their parking fee. The area around the front of the station was built with a park-and-ride system in mind, meaning a multi-story parking lot capable of taking in a large number of cars was indispensable. That would create profit for the convenience stores and shopping district, and the expenses would be offset by the construction of a high-rise apartment building. As for the residents’ moving costs, those would be covered by selling unoccupied rooms within the building. Of course, the parking lot and this apartment complex were closely linked in business terms.

You might be thinking that all of this should be impossible given the economic situation. But when you had a convenient shopping district and convenience stores situated right in front of a station connected to a city center by a private railway, there was no way people *wouldn’t* shop at those stores. As long as you made the proper arrangements and made sure people were getting value for money, the station front would still be a prime location for commerce.

The pale crimson sky darkened as night fell behind the tall apartment complex. The building of this complex would have been impossible without the 1997 amendments to the Building Standards Act and City Planning Act.

“So this night market is sponsored by the shopping district, which has the backing of the local government?” Sone-san, who had been driving, looked wistfully at the stalls. A festival like this was vital to unify the local store managers new and old. We were showing those who wanted to live in the apartment complex that there was a sense of community waiting for them.

This event owed much of its success to the railway, real estate companies, and banks owned by the Keika Group. That was what made the local government so eager to agree to it.

“Isn’t this wonderful?” I exclaimed. “There’s goldfish scooping, snack stalls, mask stalls, shaved ice, and cotton candy. It’s perfect!”

There was festival music and guests in yukata enjoying the special occasion. Japan was famous for its four distinct seasons, each of which boasted all sorts of unique events. As part of the project to revitalize these areas, I was determined that the Keika Group would continue being a part of such festivities. But seeing the fun of the festival with my own eyes, something struck me as a little odd. It felt like the people here were *visiting* like us—or perhaps “outsiders” was the right term.

“It seems these people don’t yet realize that this is their only home now,” Tachibana murmured beside me. He had just come back from speaking to some big shots. I was a little disappointed to see that he was wearing a suit, not a yukata. Seeing I was interested in what he had to say, Tachibana continued, his tone unconcerned. “Historically, Tokyo has always been a place people go to work away from home. You have one generation where any rural boys born after the first son come here for work and plant roots. The next generation are those who come for college and then decide to build their lives here. But Kanto does not have as many traditional customs like these to bring those different generations together.”

That trend was especially common in new housing developments. Older towns had temples and shrines as a central point for their communities, where large events like festivals encouraged communal exchange. One of the cornerstones of this project's success was the launching of these sorts of public events, which the local government approved to help rejuvenate the community. Then there was the next generation after the two Tachibana spoke of, even more of whom were likely to come to Tokyo. It was even more important that they attended communal events like this.

"There's a third generation?"

"The citizens of the former Northern Japan. It is only a matter of time before they head south," Tachibana explained.

I realized then that the changes in history between this world and the one I left behind made for some odd problems. Now that I looked, I could see distinctly non-Japanese people and children in yukata enjoying the market. Tokyo was due to become international, whether the citizenry liked it or not.

"What are you doing, my lady? It's not often we get to go to a night market! Let's enjoy it!" Aki-san exclaimed, camera in hand.

Keiko-san was smiling and making no move to stop her; I sighed back and decided to get fully into the festival spirit.

"All right, then! Let's have as much fun as we possibly can!"

Hopefully, these visitors would soon come to call this place home. I held that precious wish in my heart as our party enjoyed the night market just like everyone else.

Dallas, Texas, USA.

Tachibana and I were attending a party at a high-class hotel, a perfect pair of polite wallflowers. The American upper class differed

from the European upper class and Japanese nobility. Here was one way to sum it up:

"The upper class over there still consider themselves *samurai*."

I mean, I couldn't *disagree,* necessarily. Japanese nobility still had a pioneering spirit and a readiness to defend its land to the last, very much like the samurai of old. Cowboys, meanwhile, had traded in swords for guns—and right now, these cowboys were beating up this world with *money* as their weapon of choice.

"Oh, hello. It's been a while, hasn't it?" I greeted Data Analyst Angela in fluent English. She returned the greeting in Japanese with a businesslike smile.

This fancy venue had a lot of fancy food too: a smorgasbord of meat, meat, and that's right, more meat. I supposed these were the fruits of Texas, a state where the livestock industry thrived. I held a glass of grape juice in my hand. Angela had what looked like red wine.

"My dress doesn't stand out so much this time, does it? I am surprised to see you here, though. I thought those from Silicon Valley tended to favor Democrats."

"Avoiding commitment is a surefire way to win every time."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," she said.

Looking at Angela, I was fairly confident she voted as a Democrat. Thinking about it, the Democrats were still in power, which may have been part of the reason she was here at this very Republican gathering. The current president was somewhat wary of Japan. Even though this was her job, I did feel bad for Angela being forced to attend and chaperone me like this.

"How does it feel, being a kingmaker?"

Angela must have been keeping an eye on the political disturbance in Japan, as she had realized that I was the one behind

Prime Minister Izumikawa's rise to power. If there was one thing the US was good at, it was this. Most people in Japan still saw me as some kind of mascot—though there were a few who had cottoned on to the truth.

"Oh, it's so much fun! Enough that I think I might do the same over here!" I laughed as Angela visibly grimaced. The current presidential election was one of the fiercest in history.

"Why *are* you at a Republican gathering?" Angela asked me, her expression serious.

I answered with an equally serious expression, grateful that we didn't need to worry about eavesdroppers because we were both speaking Japanese.

"You know that the Moonlight Fund is shifting its focus from IT to natural resources, right? We're hoping to get closer to the people here rather than the Democratic Party, which has a lot of environmentalists. Plus, this place is right by the Gulf of Mexico."

The offshore oil field in the Gulf of Mexico was a cornerstone of America's economy and a part of the oil industry which called Texas its home. The Republican candidate for the ongoing presidential race formerly worked for an oil company. Rock-bottom crude oil prices after the Russian financial crisis were now on their way back up, and I'd very cleverly taken advantage of that.

"Why, there's a young lady here!"

Speak of the devil.

Said candidate approached me; with him was Japan's consulate-general for Houston. It seemed Prime Minister Izumikawa's orders had reached the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—I was able to become acquainted with the candidate via the consulate-general's introduction.

I returned his greeting, working to make myself sweet and demure. "I came all the way from Japan. They call me the Goddess of

Victory over there, you know." I made that up of course. But a goddess was the natural next step up from queen. I considered what I might become next.

The candidate winked at my childish joke. "I'm honored! With the Goddess of Victory gracing us with her presence, there's no way we can lose!"

Once things seemed to be going well, I exchanged a glance with Tachibana, who passed a check to one of the candidate's staff. On that check was an amount of money a grade-schooler had no right possessing. He read the check before whispering in the candidate's ear.

The candidate offered me his hand. "We'd never say no to one of our allies in the far east."

"Then I look forward to a long and fruitful friendship."

"Tachibana. Buy a company. Anything will do. I'm going to support this man in the presidential election," I informed my butler on the car ride back.

The election was set to be a close contest, so there was a strong chance my efforts would come to nothing. My plan was simple: secure votes by buying a company and having the local populace campaign for me. I'd sell the company off once the election was over, something that was incredibly easy in America. A part of me was grateful, but a part of me felt like the country was turning more and more into a living TV show.

"Where would you like to buy this company?" Tachibana asked me as I looked out over the nighttime Dallas cityscape.

"Florida."

The entire world was set to change based on only a few hundred votes. And so I would gamble on a man who had the power to win

over the world that I envisioned. Should the Democrats win…well, that would just be annoying.

"The Izumikawa Cabinet is a caretaker government. It has announced that a general election will take place at the end of July, and therefore the ruling party will be holding leader elections at the end of June. Prime Minister Izumikawa will not run in the election, having instead decided to hand the party over to a new leader. In today's news, we will take a closer look at both the leadership contest and the upcoming general election as a whole."

"We will start with the leadership election. Four candidates have put themselves forward, and the winner will lead the party into the general election. They are former Secretary-General Katou, who ran in last year's leadership election and moved to an anti-mainstream faction; Director-General of the Economic Planning Agency Aso, who is running for the first time; former Chair of the Policy Research Council, Tsurui; and former Secretary-General Hayashi. Each candidate must now secure at least twenty nominations from other dietmen to pass the first stage, but that is no easy task. While the public is often critical of the factions within the party, one of the core reasons for their continued existence is to fulfill the twenty-nominations rule. These nominators are betting on their candidate to win, and there may be an agreed-upon ministerial position waiting for them should their candidate become party leader, and then prime minister."

"It seems that each candidate for the Fellowship of Constitutional Government's leadership election has managed to gather the twenty nominations required. The winner of this election will be the one who earns the majority of the combined 514 votes available, cast by Diet and regional members. We now move over to our analyst. How are each of our candidates currently expected to perform?"

"At the moment, former General-Secretary Hayashi appears to be taking the lead, with his own faction and the support of former

Prime Minister Fuchigami's faction behind him. Next comes former Secretary-General Katou, then former Chair of the Policy Research Council Tsurui, and finally Aso, Director-General of the Economic Planning Agency. Former Prime Minister Fuchigami's faction gave former Secretary-General Katou's faction the cold shoulder during the previous party leadership election, so it is likely the former prime minister fears revenge should former Secretary-General Katou win this one.

That said, according to the intended regional vote online, former Secretary-General Katou looks like the favorite to win, making this a highly unpredictable election."

"That may well be why Prime Minister Izumikawa has declared neutrality in this election."

"That's right. In this election in particular, the prime minister's behavior could potentially have a decisive influence over the results. Though he has handed his faction to former Secretary-General Katou for the election, it cannot be overstated how much influence he still holds within that faction. Additionally, although his was an interim government, Prime Minister Izumikawa's administration gave permission for the construction of the Shikoku Shinkansen, which is to be fully funded by Keika Railway. As such, it's expected that the local vote in Shikoku will follow the prime minister. Many have criticized the Shinkansen as a public works project, but it is a done deal, and Prime Minister Izumikawa apparently only agreed to the project on the condition of the construction's smooth progress. Some say the entire election could be decided based on who he chooses to support."

"Is it thought he is more likely to back former Secretary-General Katou or former Secretary-General Hayashi?"

"Caretaker government or not, thinking in terms of factions, it is natural to assume he is more likely to back former Secretary-General Katou, but the prime minister has not yet made a move to break his neutrality. It is thought this might be because of a move by

former Secretary-General Katou to use his inherited faction to overthrow his superiors.

There are also rumors within Nagatachou that Prime Minister Izumikawa will choose to support former Secretary-General Hayashi, former Prime Minister Fuchigami's pick, to repay the former prime minister for handing over his power.

As with former Prime Minister Fuchigami, the possibility of the elected's victory coming at the price of his faction's cohesion makes this election ever more unpredictable. But when faction splits can be spurred by the current coalition and opposition, you have to wonder how long Prime Minister Izumikawa will be able to maintain neutrality."

"How are things looking for the general election afterward?"

"The opposition's talking points are being overshadowed by the current leadership elections, so on the whole it looks like the coalition has the advantage at the moment. It appears that Secretary-General Koizumi, who is running the election, has managed to win over many of the block votes needed, and it seems likely that the ruling party will receive a majority. However, this situation is bringing its own troubles."

"For example?"

"The current three-party coalition is at the center of the conflict. The Fellowship of Constitutional Government has been discussing how to reconvene with their part of the coalition and return as a single party again, but those discussions have not necessarily been fruitful. That part has been openly supporting former Secretary-General Katou despite its own inability to run in the elections, and it is thought that this has contributed to former Secretary-General Katou's strong position in the regional vote. Furthermore, rumors in Nagatachou hint that they plan to use their connections with the opposition and, depending on how the general election goes, join to force the implementation of a prime minister via Diet nomination. These are consistent with rumors that Prime Minister Izumikawa covertly supports former Secretary-General

Hayashi, but that he has openly remained neutral to prevent former Secretary-General Katou from teaming up with the opposition and his supporters within the coalition."

"Even adding together the approval rating of Izumikawa and the Fellowship of Constitutional government doesn't bring them to 50 percent, the very lowest level an administration should sit at."

"Granted, a low rating is to be expected of a caretaker government. What's more interesting is that the party's rating remains sluggish while support for the opposition is growing. Their three key aims of zaibatsu dissolution, a solution to the bad debt problem, and the eradication of the close ties between politicians and businessmen seem to be gaining support from floating voters."

"And yet the ruling party still seems set to gain a majority of the votes?"

"In the smaller constituencies, there is only one seat to fight for. Since the opposition party is so split, that is where the ruling party holds the advantage. The opposition's increase in power primarily comes from its forecasted growth in the Proportional Representation Block."

"Thank you. Now, onto finance. Major supermarket Sachii has today announced that it will ask to invoke the Civil Rehabilitation Law at the Tokyo District Court. It currently holds debts totalling over one trillion yen, meaning a large-scale bankruptcy is…"

It was a rainy June day when Nakamaro-oniisama came to visit my estate. We ate dinner together, and then he explained the reason for his visit.

"Runa. Father has decided to accept you as his official daughter." This was what I expected. Keikain Runa needed her place in the Keikain Dukedom to make a good villain for the game. Nakamaro-oniisama drank some more of his after-dinner coffee before continuing. "It has been decided that the Keika Group's core

businesses are to be absorbed by the Iwazaki Group. Keika Pharmaceuticals will merge with Iwazaki Pharma, Keika Chemicals with Iwazaki Chemical, Keika Shipping with Teikoku Yusen, and Keika Storage with Iwazaki Logistics. The Iwazaki Group will manage most of these, but as the founders of Keika Pharmaceuticals, we hold 60 percent of the managerial rights."

Keika Pharmaceuticals would thus become Keika-Iwazaki Pharma, Keika Chemicals would become Keika-Iwazaki Chemical, and the other companies would simply lose their names. Allowing the Keika Group to maintain management over Keika Pharmaceuticals was a kindness that the Iwazaki Group, one of Japan's leading zaibatsu, did not need to grant.

"Oh, by the way, I met Marquess Asagiri's daughter at school. What is her sister like?"

Nakamaro-oniisama smiled and nodded. "Her name is Sakurako-san. She has a very charming smile. I'll introduce you when I next have the opportunity."

At this level of society, marriage was a transaction meant to join two houses together rather than anything born out of romantic feelings—yet Nakamaro-oniisama was ready to accept his fate with a smile.

"Wouldn't you rather marry for love?" I suddenly asked.

"Speaking honestly, yes I would. However, I have decided that my house is more important. After all, you are a part of this house as well."

His words and the way he smiled at me seemed genuine, but I inferred that it meant his marriage was connected to this merger with the Iwazaki Group.

"Does the Asagiri House have connections to the Iwazaki Group?"

Nakamaro-oniisama's smile froze. I thought so. Nobility was like that.

"Yes. Marquess Asagiri receives support from the Iwazaki Zaibatsu."

Meaning…

"They want Keika Holdings," I remarked, sipping my grape juice.

I was right, of course; Nakamaro-oniisama looked even more like he was struggling to keep up his smile. "It's because you couldn't restrain yourself, Runa. I heard you've been playing around under Prime Minister Izumikawa's nose. Your actions frightened the other zaibatsu."

Keika Holdings had acquired Kyomei Bank at the start of the year to bail it out, merged Teisei and Sougou Department Stores, launched Keika Railway to bail out Echigo Engineering Co. and helped with the reshuffle of Shiyo Electric Co to progress, and started construction on a new Shinkansen. I wasn't exactly lying low.

Thinking back, Iwazaki Heavy Industries approached me with an offer to buy Echigo Engineering shortly after I bailed it out. They said something about wanting to strengthen their industrial plant business, but now I knew the real reason behind it.

Hold on a moment.

Iwazaki Motors was *so* encouraging during the Ayukawa Motors bailout discussions, and while we were bailing out Shiyo Electric Co., I seemed to remember Imperial Iwazaki Bank offering that we would bail out Iwazaki Electric as well.

"Marquess Asagiri's wife is a daughter of the Iwazaki barony."

I clapped my hands as it all came together. The head family of the Iwazaki Group had been conferred a *barony*. A marquess and a baron's daughter made for a mismatched pairing, but through the marriage, the baron's daughter was able to link the family to a

different march by becoming their "adopted daughter." The Iwazaki Group used these kinds of marriages to spread themselves through Japan's political and business circles, allowing them to remain at their center.

"Did I go too far?" I asked.

"Yes, especially in the political sphere. I understand you are doing this for the sake of the country, but you have used too much influence across two prime ministers now. I should think you might want to take a step back with the next prime minister. I think I speak on behalf of all the country's zaibatsu—not just the Iwazaki Group—when I ask you politely to *reign it in*."

Nakamaro-oniisama switched on the TV, where they were announcing the results of today's party leadership election. The fierce battle was eventually decided by Prime Minister Izumikawa, who slowly but surely showed where his loyalties lay.

"Former Secretary-General Hayashi Gakuto, backed by both Prime Minister Izumikawa and former Prime Minister Fuchigami, has won the party leadership election. Second place former Secretary-General Katou gained more votes than expected, and he was followed by Tsurui, former Chair of the Policy Research Council, and Aso, Director-General of the Economic Planning Agency.

Former Secretary-General Katou has expressed outrage at Prime Minister Izumikawa's support of his rival. The factions in support of Prime Minister Izumikawa have similarly announced former Secretary-General Katou's expulsion, splitting the Katou Faction.

Party Leader Hayashi has started filling his cabinet's positions. Dietman Murashita will be his vice president. His Secretary-General will come from the Fuchigami Faction, and his Chairman of the General Council will come from the Katou Faction. Tsurui will be Chair of the Policy Research Council once more, and Prime Minister

Izumikawa has been chosen as both Minister of Finance and deputy prime minister. All the appointments were announced via a press conference.

The change of Secretary-General Koizumi from Party Leader Hayashi's own faction this close to a snap election has the potential to cause undue influence on the election, so instead the handover of the Secretary-General position will happen during a special Diet session once the election is over.

Regarding the snap election, the Fellowship of Constitutional Government at the center of the ruling coalition is expected to secure a majority…"

This time, I didn't do anything public. However, Party Leader Hayashi made it to the top of his party without making any enemies within said party, and he repaid Prime Minister Izumikawa for his last-minute support through the appointments he gave him. That meant he was there to back up the new regime, which I took as a sign to continue my work wiping out bad debts. There were some who clearly disagreed—like those who showed up at my house.

I was still in the middle of trying to sort out the bad debt situation, but things were progressing well. Thanks to Taiei's commercial credit card, the supermarket had the biggest, most wide-ranging debts out there. But I would simply leave it alone and move my focus to the bad debts held by general contractors.

Using Keika Railway, I'd made a bold promise to construct a Shinkansen and gotten several hundred billion yen of government funding for the project, and now I was expecting revenue gains for these general contractors. General contractors were an important part of the Fellowship of Constitutional Government's voter base. Their work benefitted the country, but you couldn't deny that it was wrapped up in politics.

“Keika-Iwazaki Pharma will take a seat on the Choufuu Council, as will Keika Holdings. Things are going to get heated, so I hope you prepare yourself.”

Something bothered me about Nakamaro-oniisama’s tone.

“Nakamaro-oniisama. Am I going to become your enemy?”

Nakamaro-oniisama smiled at me in a way that didn’t reveal what he was really thinking. But I wanted to trust the words he said to me next.

“Don’t be silly. You are my precious sister, Runa.”

I couldn’t deny how happy that made me, and I wanted to show him my appreciation.

“Nakamaro-oniisama, would you like to be an outside director for Keika Holdings?”

The Iwazaki Group were after Keika Holdings, and their treatment of the Keikain House would differ greatly depending on whether they held a seat at its table. Nakamaro-oniisama said nothing, but he accepted the position by placing a fond hand on my head.

America’s Republican National Convention was a party of sorts—one where the Republican Party made their final decision on the nominee who would enter the presidential race. This year it was taking place in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was a lively three-day event orchestrated to create a sense of unity, and while the opposing Democrats made sure theirs didn’t overlap, they were currently getting excited over a similar event.

The Republican’s candidate for the election was about to be finalized. As a major Republican donor, I was naturally invited and treated as a VIP. I studied the fun, party atmosphere, but I couldn’t help but feel disillusioned.

“Is something the matter, my lady?” a voice asked in Japanese.

Angela, chaperoning me once more, looked even more disillusioned than I did. My official adoption by Keikain Kiyomaro had been announced before I came here, so all the important people over here, Angela included, were treating me as the daughter of a duke now. It wasn’t just the Keikain link that led them to treat me like this, but my Romanov blood—another way in which I was connected to nobility.

“Oh, I’m just a little bored.”

“You should have sided with the Democrats. They’ve got Hollywood stars at their convention.”

“…I’ll consider it.”

Hollywood, as well as Silicon Valley, were both in California, a stronghold of the Democrats. They also had Pennsylvania and New York, and it was these states on either coast that contributed to their continued advantage in the elections. Meanwhile, the Republicans had their main voter base in Texas and across the Midwest. Most people saw the more recent presidential elections as battles between the coastal and inland regions.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, my lady. I know all about your contributions to your country.”

Since the presidential election coincided with the US House of Representatives election, I was also approached by several Californian Republican representatives, one after the other. They were after my money and my face as a poster girl. I smiled and shook their hands, allowing the photographers around us a clear shot of my face. I was wearing a kimono to highlight my homeland and heritage, which only made me more of a toy to them. Not helping was my three-quarters Slavic appearance, which made me stand out even more.

“My lady, would you give us an opportunity to get involved in your business?”

Next came the entrepreneurs who supported the Republican Party. My Moonlight Fund had continued to make a fortune by focusing on investments in the booming IT and resource sectors. It was no wonder there were those seeking to leech off my leftovers.

“Hmm. Perhaps another time. I’m still busy sorting through all these bad debts at home.”

I wasn’t *lying*, of course. I was still desperately using my fund’s massive profits to deal with the bad debt situation in Japan. Apparently, this was especially hard to understand for those living on Wall Street.

“Why is she wasting her time on something like *that*? It’d be way better just to let the companies crash and build them up new, or invest in more profitable industries.”

While greedy, they were still good-natured people. It was because they thought they were right that they were trying to push their definition of justice onto me without considering whether it suited me or not. The same went for the person right in front of me.

“My lady, you have an impressive talent for investing. Unfortunately, I cannot condone the way you waste your profits. Money’s sole purpose is to create more money. I can prove it to you—if you choose to invest in us.”

General Energy Online: the CEO of American’s seventh-ranking major company was reaching out to me, and all I could return was an uncomfortable smile. Knowing the fate of his company as I did, investing in him *would* be a genuine waste of my profits, though I had to force myself not to say that out loud. After all, this was a proposal from America’s most innovative company for several years running, if a certain finance magazine was anything to go by. No one in their right mind would say no to this. I *wanted* to say no—

emphatically—but again, I held back. I was the daughter to a duke now; I had to be more thoughtful in how I refused things.

"Oh? I was thinking of getting involved in a new Californian business."

"What sort of business?"

This man had close ties to the one set to become the presidential nominee at this very conference. It seemed he'd taken my bait, so I spoke a single word—something everyone in Japan thought was free.

"Water." I showed him some English documents from a Japanese desalination company. This wasn't just water—it was water that took extra effort to produce. "Keika Pharmaceuticals is submitting a thesis on the benefits of deep ocean water to a learned society. I'm thinking of building a water pump in Kouchi prefecture to access it, with a desalination plant run by Keika Chemicals and Echigo Engineering Co."

He looked silently at the thesis and plant documents. I bet they looked like pure money to him. Water was naturally a strategic resource; we needed it to live, after all.

"We'll pump up this water and transport it in supertankers to sell in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Dalian."

We were at the point where truckloads of millionaires were about to live out flashy lifestyles in Asia. I was pretty confident in my plan, but I'd shelved it for the time being because of the Iwazaki Group swallowing up our companies.

"Ignoring the deep ocean water over here for a moment, I've heard that California has been having problems with water shortages."

The Moonlight Fund was headquartered in Silicon Valley after all. The water situation was so serious it was becoming a political problem. Despite that, the state's environmentally minded

inhabitants meant there were restrictions on water exploitation, so nothing was being done about it. A water desalination plant required a power station big enough to run it too, so they couldn't build one without building the other.

"Construct a desalination plant, use giant tankers to transport the water, and build infrastructure to allow that water to flow into major cities…this is going to be one big business, but for the moment our investments are focused on Japan, so we don't have time for it."

This was originally my plan to fight water shortages in Kagawa prefecture. The water shortages there were recurring, and I was worried about securing industrial water for the complex I had there. That was when I came up with the idea of pumping water and transporting it in via the complex's tanker ships. That was when I thought to make a big deal about the benefits of deep ocean water so I could sell it for a higher price, but I knew the upcoming situation in California meant they'd have to buy water at a high price anyway. Incidentally, your average tanker traveling between the Middle East and Japan had a capacity of anywhere between one-hundred-and-fifty tons and three-hundred-thousand tons, so as long as we could do something to reduce the oil stench, we could transport more than enough water to sell.

"You can have that. Do whatever you want with it."

"Nothing is more expensive than that which is given for free, my lady. You're asking me to help you out with your power and water business in Japan in exchange for helping me out with this water business in California, yes?"

"I'll let you interpret it however you like. Our general trading company, the Akamatsu Corporation, will be happy to assist you if you want to discuss things further. Now, if you'll please excuse me…"

The project required a hundred billion yen to get off the ground, but it was doomed to fail. In fact, I would contact Toudou and ask him to raise the bar to make sure it would *absolutely* fail.

The next day, the story reached the ears of the media all across America, causing General Energy Online's stock prices to surge. Needless to say, I was exasperated.

The party atmosphere had me dragging Tachibana and my chaperone, Angela, all over the place. I ran headfirst into another invitation without thinking. Though it was a far cry from the Democratic National Convention, the Republicans had a stage at theirs too for singers to perform. With the party's huge Midwest power base, the main genre of choice was country music. I listened to the idyllic, nostalgic tones and clapped my hands to the beat. My appreciation drew everyone's attention.

"Young lady. That's quite the striking outfit you're wearing."

"I'm from the Far East. It's nice to meet you."

I was getting into the rhythm of the music, and I knew the people around me were growing expectant. Singing along with everyone was basic manners at a place like this.

"Can I ask for a particular song?" I asked.

"Of course. What would you like?"

I named the song, and the guitar began to play as all of us joined in with the lyrics. It was quite enjoyable.

I'd forgotten that this event was being broadcast all across the country by three major networks. Dressed as I was, and with a voice as beautiful as mine, there was no way I'd escape notice. Sure enough, letting out my voice with as much enthusiasm as I could muster triggered my debut across the whole of America as a

beautiful, kimono-wearing Russian girl—all while I remained totally unaware.

About the Opposition: There's no way they can win!

1: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:01 ID: lunakeikain

I was sure they could win, but it looks like the coalition is going to get a majority! :D excellent news!

2: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:02 ID: ???

Second, but I got here too late…

3: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:03 ID: ???

I thought we'd get a regime change, but never a coalition win!

4: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:04 ID: ???

I'm actually laughing out loud right now.

10: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:14 ID: ???

>>1

The splits in the opposition must really be hurting them.

I was thinking the Fellowship of Constitutional Government might be able to get a majority. I guess the coalition's going to survive thanks to the House of Councilors.

11: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:15 ID: ???

>>10

If only the opposition's plans for a massive comeback didn't fall through! orz

13: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:16 ID: ???

This is mainly a victory for Secretary-General Koizumi, right??? It's a wonder they managed to pull this off considering the party and the Izumikawa regime's approval ratings.

15: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:17 ID: ???

F**k off troll

18: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:21 ID: ???

Things could've been a lot different if the Katou Faction stepped back after those splits in the party leader election.

Secretary-General Koizumi could have made them, right? But he didn't. If the Katou Faction left the party, I think Katou-san might have had enough support to win, judging by how popular he is online…

20: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:23 ID: ???

I've heard Secretary-General Koizumi is going to hand his position over to Acting Secretary-General Nonaka after the election. After this victory, it should be easy for him to stay in office, but he said in one of those flash-report interviews that he's already handed in his resignation letter to Party Leader Hayashi.

23: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:34 ID: ???

The religious vote is really something. Ignoring that was the opposition's biggest mistake.

29: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:47 ID: ???

>>23

Quit trying to bait us.

30: Anonymous: 07/23/00 20:50 ID: ???

I think I see what happened. They wanted power so badly they lost, just like that. You could call it foolish, or just bad luck. Either way, I wouldn't expect anything else from the opposition.

32: Anonymous: 07/23/00 21:01 ID: ???

The ballot counting's properly started now.

For the House of Councilors by-election, we've currently got two wins and one loss for the ruling party. The opposition could've won too, if only they played their cards right…

33: Anonymous: 07/23/00 21:04 ID: lunakeikain

This is only the second round too. Nagatachou sure is complex.

34: Anonymous: 07/23/00 21:10 ID: ???

This thread is amazing lolololol

35: Anonymous: 07/23/00 21:11 ID: ???

>>33

What was the first round then?

36: Anonymous: 07/23/00 21:14 ID: lunakeikain

>>35

The party leader elections for the ruling party.

It was a fight between Party Leader Hayashi and former Secretary-General Katou, who the opposition wanted to win.

Now we're in the second round, and the last round will be the extraordinary Diet session where they vote to nominate a prime minister. The leader of Japan's Liberal Alliance, Oosawa, used his place in the coalition to create all this strife, and what's happening now is going to send future Secretary-General Nonaka into a huge rage. I can see him shouting about crushing them now.

40: Anonymous: 07/23/00 21:20 ID: ???

>>36

Huh? That sounds terrifying.

48: Anonymous: 07/23/00 21:26 ID: ???

I bet the elected officials themselves are worrying about who to nominate right now.

68: Anonymous: 07/23/00 21:59 ID: ???

The opposition isn't actually doing that bad.

They're projected to win in a lot of urban areas and districts in every prefecture.

69: Anonymous: 07/23/00 22:01 ID: ???

Did you see what the opposition leader said? If former Secretary-General Katou aligns his policies with the opposition, he'd vote for him for Prime Minister.

70: Anonymous: 07/23/00 22:04 ID: lunakeikain

The problem is the House of Councilors; there's no winning a majority without the coalition in power.

The Prime Minister nominee needs a majority to win, and if he can't win that in the first round, it'll go to a runoff ballot. If the opposition then pushes their members to vote for former Secretary-General Katou, there's a chance he'll get a majority with their votes and those of his own faction. I bet both sides are desperate to split the vote of the other.

71: Anonymous: 07/23/00 22:07 ID: ???

>>70

Are we looking at another forty-day conflict?

72: Anonymous: 07/23/00 22:09 ID: ???

>>71

It looks like some will be voting for former Secretary-General Katou right from the start, so I can see him making a comeback.

86: Anonymous: 07/23/00 22:33 ID: ???

The coalition have their majority! I just saw it on the news!

87: Anonymous: 07/23/00 22:37 ID: ???

The Fellowship of Constitutional Government got the whole of Shikoku and Okayama.

It's gotta be because of the Shinkansen.

Anyone who can bring a public works project to the countryside is a tough one to beat.

88: Anonymous: 07/23/00 22:40 ID: ???

Hokkaido's working hard too.

The commies there are putting up a fight.

89: Anonymous: 07/23/00 22:42 ID: ???

That's because it's the Keika Group's turf.

I shudder to think what would've happened if the group didn't save Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank.

Then they're building that Shinkansen in Shikoku, so everyone's gonna hope the group will come for their prefecture next, natch.

It was no mistake that the opposition made dissolving the zaibatsu one of their policies.

90: Anonymous: 07/23/00 22:46 ID: lunakeikain

I'm not denying that, but the opposition is going to find itself in a real mess now.

About the Opposition: The Fellowship of Constitutional Government Couldn't Break Them Down!

1: Anonymous: 08/01/00 22:46 ID: lunakeikain

We broke it down instead :D Excellent stuff!

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GLOSSARY AND NOTES

Caretaker Government: A temporary cabinet formed to rule in the interim before a national election.

Highly Capable Politician: The man who originally pulled the trigger to tear apart the political world, putting an end to the 1955 System.

Second Regional Bank: The majority of these were mutual savings banks catering to small and medium businesses.

King Khalid Military City: A military city in which the US armed forces were stationed during the Gulf War.

Paper Bags: First, buy some big, cheap boxed goods from a department store and have them wrap them for you. Unwrap them very, very carefully. Next, buy some second-hand gifts from a recycling shop and use the wrapping paper from the department store to wrap them yourself. Buying genuine products from the department store is extremely expensive, leading to the wide adoption of this secret trick.

A Joke from Shikoku: Four friends, each from one of Shikoku's four prefectures, are deciding where to meet. They unanimously vote to meet in Tokyo.

2000 Presidential Election: One of the closest contests of an era, which even ended up in the courts. There was only a 327-vote difference in the contested state of Florida. Those 327 votes changed history.

Desalination Company: The basic process is desalinizing seawater and then putting the salt back into the ocean. The process was adopted by cities such as Fukuoka, which suffered from water shortages, but in Kagawa's case, they were worried about the disposed salt negatively affecting the density of the seawater and causing damage, and so gave up on pursuing its implementation.

The Song Runa Sang: Country Roads.

Runa's "About" Thread: These "About [blank]" threads originally parodied 2channel's military board; they made fun of the opposition's hypocrisy by likening it to military affairs.

Forty-Day Conflict: A period of fierce infighting within the Liberal Democratic Party.

Chapter 6:
A Lady's Everyday Life:
The Year 2000

"How do you do, Keikain-san?"

"How do you do?"

There were some girls who greeted me merely to be polite. Girls tended to form groups in general, but high society also often necessitated pulling others down. Either way, cliques were definitely in the process of forming.

"Morning, Runa-chan!" Asuka-chan said.

Hotaru-chan smiled and waved at me.

"Good morning, everyone!" Mio-chan greeted.

In such a cliquey environment, I was grateful for my friends from kindergarten. I met up with them in front of the school gates, and then we headed on through. Asuka-chan had lots of friends both in and outside our class, so she was doing a lot of greeting herself as we walked. Lately, our circle of friends had grown.

"Good morning." Takahashi Akiko-san ran up to me, waving the bag in her hand lightly. I spotted a bamboo sword inside.

"Hello, Takahashi-san. Did you have training this morning?"

"I did. I joined in with the kendo club through my association with the dojo."

Her house was a dojo, and she practiced kendo. She must have just showered; I could smell soap and shampoo coming off her.

"Good morning, everybody!"

"Good morning, Kurimori-san."

"Oh, Kurimori-san! I have a favor to ask. Would you mind if I copied your homework book?"

“I would truly like to say no, but I suppose if you pay me back in some way. Why do you always ask me that, anyway?”

“I feel as though you’re the only one I *can* repay.”

Kurimori-san was the closest in our group to an average person. I’d witnessed these negotiations between her and Takahashi-san to borrow her notebook with increasing regularity.

“I’m easy to repay! You simply have to remember my daddy’s party at the next election.”

“There’s no politician’s daughter quite like you, Asuka-chan.”

“What about you, Runa-chan?” Asuka-chan asked.

I blinked at her. I didn’t need any more money, and I was doing my homework as I was supposed to.

“I suppose you could answer for me during roll call?”

“Seriously?” Asuka-chan looked exasperated.

I guess grade-schoolers didn’t really do that kind of thing. Oops.

Hotaru-chan was waving her hand enthusiastically in the air.

“Hotaru-oneechan says ‘what about me?’!” Mio-chan translated.

Hotaru-chan beamed at me.

“Sorry. I feel like owing you a favor would be more dangerous than anything else.”

Her shoulders drooped and I laughed nervously.

The final member of our group arrived. “Good morning, everybody.” It was Katsuki Shiori-san. She always carried herself with dignity.

This was what my mornings had been like recently.

“What are we doing for lunch? I can save everyone a space if we’re all eating together.”

“Yes, please do, Keikain-sama.”

As my circle of female friends increased, there were some who called me “-san” while others called me “-sama.” Those removed from the Keika Group and of similar status used “-san.” Those trying to suck up to me called me “-sama.” They were likely encouraged by their parents to make friends with me, either for my money or my influence. These girls were probably my followers during the game. Not that any of them stayed after my downfall.

I ate lunch with them so that I didn’t get on their bad side. There was another reason they spent time with me—these girls also admired my male friends.

“What are you gonna do for lunch, Runa?”

“Sorry, Eiichi-kun. I’m eating with the girls today.”

“Sure. See ya.”

It was these interactions that they admired and wanted to see up close. They wanted to get as close to the boys as I was. Naturally, we chatted a lot about boys when we ate together. The girls also bought me dessert at lunch as a way to win me over. And yet I still found things more awkward with them than with Asuka-chan or Hotaru-chan.

“Who do you like, Keikain-sama, out of the three?”

The inevitable question filled the air with tension. Clearly they were trying not to clash with me, and I smiled wryly as I responded.

“I’m not sure yet. Honestly, it’s more fun just to spend time with the three of them and not worry about things like love.”

For mature children at least, this was the age to get excited about love. I, however, had lived a little too long to get similarly excited. It was at times like this that the memories from my previous life felt like nothing more than a burden.

“Does that mean we’re free to confess to one of them?”

They weren't pulling any punches today.

I waved a casual hand as I sipped on my grape juice. "Of course. With my family's status, they're the ones who will decide my love life, anyway."

That was one of the stricter rules of high society, especially in Japan where family position still carried a lot of influence. It was a real pain. However, in exchange, once you'd produced a successor, you were free to have all the affairs you wanted. That was still true, even though women had gained more autonomy in society after the bubble.

To these girls, my words would have translated like this:

"Feel free to confess, and if they say yes, it's no problem. Just know that I'll end up as a legal wife to one of them."

They were all at a level of society where that was fine. At this school, scholarship students were allowed to join from junior-high level, and it wasn't until high-school level that our protagonist, Takanashi Mizuho, would join on a scholarship and shout at us about how "weird" our way of living was.

"Perhaps I shall phrase my love letter like this."

"Should I confess, I wonder?"

"I would like to share my feelings."

I could practically hear the popular love ballad playing behind their excited squeals. Was there anything that society got more excited over than love?

The letter slid out of my school shoe cupboard and fluttered down through the air like a butterfly. My eyes, and those of the three usual boys, watched it, and when it hit the floor, I picked it up.

"What's that, Runa?"

"Clearly it's a letter challenging her to a duel."

I put it into my bag unopened. I wasn't particularly happy about it, but I detected tension on the faces of the three boys. They were fully aware of love themselves, and perhaps already at the stage of wanting to pursue it.

"Curious?" I asked.

"Yeah."

It was at times like this when Eiichi-kun was most upfront. It was clear to me by the way his brows knitted together that he was struggling to keep a neutral expression.

"There's nothing to worry about. For lovely girls like me, it's the family who decides on our partners."

"That was rather immodest of you, Keikain."

I ignored Mitsuya-kun's comment. It was probably the fact that they knew one of them might be chosen as my husband that kept them calm.

"It makes me rather grateful we have our status, but it can also cause problems, can't it?" Yuujirou-kun gave a half-smile. He was in the midst of marriage talks himself at the moment. Once a prime minister resigned (even a prime minister of a mere six months), they were given the title of count. As an influential man within the country who had just gained even more prestige, it was no surprise that the requests were rolling in.

"Have you got any plans for the weekend?"

"I shall be stuck in my hometown."

"No. I'll be spending it by myself as usual."

Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun answered simply, but Eiichi-kun stayed quiet for some reason. He wasn't even meeting our gazes, so I felt I had to say something.

"I suppose you have a date, Eiichi-kun?"

"N-no!"

So a definite yes then. Interesting—I didn't realize Eiichi-kun was at that stage yet. Leaving things alone would be boring, so I decided to tease him.

"Girls are delicate creatures, you know. Make sure you take care of her if you don't want things to go wrong."

"Nah. She's not the kinda girl who needs taking care of like that."

"It sounds to me as though you're setting yourself up for failure—especially considering how insensitive you can be." I wagged a finger at him, purposely making myself sound condescending.

Eiichi-kun brushed it off. "My grandfather wants to meet you this weekend. Could you make sure you're free?"

Wait.

What?

The Toukai region. Teia City. A company town whose space was mostly monopolized by Teia Motor Co. and its affiliates. I was there to visit the town's Teia Residence.

"This is my house. Make yourself at home."

It was an impressive estate, and I had a vague recollection of it from the game. Eiichi-kun was looking at me curiously.

"Please forgive me for summoning you all the way out here, young lady."

"My name is Keikain Runa. Thank you so much for your generous invitation." After my ladylike introduction, Eiichi-kun and I were offered a seat.

This man was advisor to the Teia Motor Co. His name was Teia Kiichi. Eiichi-kun's grandfather, he was the man who'd made the Teia Group into the behemoth it was. He gave me the warm smile of an older man, but his eyes weren't smiling in the least. The reason

Eiichi-kun was nervous seemed to be borne more of business than love.

"When you leave the front lines and find yourself with oodles of time, you get this unintentional urge to reprimand the younger generation. I know it's a nasty habit, but I would be much obliged if you could listen to this old man's nonsense for a spell."

A maid entered to place a grape juice and cola on the table between us and Kiichi-shi. When I picked up my glass, Kiichi-shi's tone softened.

"Making products means making people. A company is not something you buy and make immediate profit from."

At his grandfather's warning—or perhaps advice—Eiichi-kun looked at me and inclined his head. He wasn't stupid. He knew Kiichi-shi wasn't talking romance in the least.

"Did you do something to make my grandfather mad, Runa?"

"No. My major purchases have been in the logistics field, and while I did bail out Echigo Engineering Co., their focus is mainly on railway vehicles and industrial plants."

Echigo Engineering Co. was a railway vehicle manufacturer in Niigata prefecture, and it had fallen on hard times because of its major debts from its industrial plants abroad. Some of these plants were for medical and chemical products, so the company had a business connection with both Keika Pharmaceuticals and Keika Chemicals, hence why we bailed them out as a stopgap measure. Their total debts came to two hundred thirty billion yen. I was almost certain this company wasn't the problem, until a thought occurred.

"Could this be related to my rounding up Ayukawa Motors's smaller factories and turning them into OEM suppliers, I wonder…?"

"You've been doing stuff like *that*?" Eiichi-kun asked, exasperated.

That plan, however, had only just started. Said plan was to gather the technicians who ran worn, small-town factories and were bad at trading, then buy overinvested Ayukawa Motors's second- and third-level companies' factories to create production lines for cutting-edge parts. The purse strings were guarded by employees on transfer from Keika Holdings, and the Akamatsu Corporation had been entrusted with the business side of things. The aim was to reliably supply good parts on a national scale and maintain the ability to respond to large orders. We marketed ourselves in this way to car makers as tertiary subcontractors.

Including Teia Motor Co., Japan's automobile industry stuck like glue to the "just-in-time" philosophy, making sure it sat on as little stock as possible. We used cutting-edge IT to compensate for the losses caused by that kind of stock management and resulting parts shipping, and because we had instant access to Dog Express, a large-scale transport company, we were able to react quickly to urgent supply issues. That was how we had drawn so much attention. The new company was called Keika Parts Manufacturing, and I'd decided it would go hand in hand with bailing out Echigo Engineering Co.

"I believe we've marketed ourselves as subcontractors to Teia Motor Co. as well. If that has offended you in some way, please accept my apologies." I dipped my head, but Kiichi-shi shook his and corrected me.

"Shiyo Electric Company."

"So this is about *batteries*."

I was right; Kiichi-shi's eyes narrowed.

Shiyo Electric Co. had switched managing directors very recently after a recall of kerosene fan heaters and illegal sales of solar panels. After that, it attempted to turn over a new leaf by announcing a series of bold, wide-ranging investments. However, not only did Keika Holdings put a stop to those investments, it caused violent

contention when it advocated for the removal of the company's founder and everyone close to him—they'd discovered and brought to light covered-up losses from bad investments in the company's accounts.

Batteries were one of Shiyo Electric Co.'s main products.

"I get it. My grandfather thinks you're trying to meddle with the production of our hybrid cars," Eiichi-kun said. The sheen of sweat on his forehead told me how serious this was.

The Teia Motor Co. was ahead of the time in its sale of hybrid cars, and now that it had mostly resolved the new technology's problems, it was ready to move on to large-scale production and sales. The core component of those cars was their battery. When I acquired Shiyo Electric Co., I passed its battery division over to Keika Parts Manufacturing and considered supplying other companies with our original hybrid-car batteries—but I knew it wouldn't go well.

"I do not wish to fight with Eiichi-kun. However, Shiyo Electric Co. has been covering up losses of close to a hundred billion yen. We have exposed those losses and must now stick with the company till the end, although I can assure you, they will follow the Keika Rules."

"Did you hear that, Eiichi? This is an excellent opportunity for you. I'll leave you to deal with it."

Eiichi-kun? He was still in elementary school. Putting my own special case aside, wasn't it a little early for him to get involved in business?

"You have until Runa-san's stay ends. I'll have Shuuichi make the actual plan, but you must come up with a draft. You'll have to use your head. This girl is no pushover."

"I know, Grandfather."

Eiichi-kun's face as he said that was strikingly attractive, but I kept that to myself. Only once I'd downed my grape juice did I realize

what had just been said. My “stay”? I supposed that meant I was spending the night.

That evening, I was relaxing after an extravagant meal in the Teia’s guest house, when Eiichi-kun’s father, Shuuichi-shi, came to see me. We made small talk for a bit before broaching the main subject.

“I’m sorry for my father’s nonsense, Runa-kun.”

“It’s quite all right. I’m sure he’s simply taken an interest in me because his grandson has. And I’m sure he knows he can get away with his ‘nonsense’ because you’ll come to cover for him like this.” I paused. “What do you think is the answer to this exercise?”

“That the best thing we can do is nothing.”

I nodded, knowing that was right. Merging companies was not as simple as one plus one making two, especially when it came to the technology and engineering sectors.

There was no reason why a team of talented engineers who specialized in car parts couldn’t make a battery for a hybrid motor—but only once the battery technicians had joined forces with those from Shiyo and gone through a *lot* of trial and error. Teia Motor Co. had a decisive strategy for the stabilization of its hybrid-car parts: to source and patent every single one in house. It meant there was nothing for them to worry about, as long as I couldn’t produce and circulate *my* parts immediately.

“Won’t other car manufacturers just attempt to create copycat parts?”

“We should *welcome* it if they do. It would mean hybrid cars are taking over a larger portion of the market. But even if they attempt to make those parts, they’ll just run into a roadblock because of the patents.”

No matter how much other companies tried to keep up, those patent fees would give Teia a price advantage. Only a man who had absolute confidence in his company's technological skill could make such a statement.

"The second-best option would be to buy Shiyo's battery division—but that would lead to a falling out with you. It's one of Shiyo's best divisions, and losing it would mean losing the centerpiece of your Keika Parts Manufacturing. At that point, we may as well just set up a conglomerate to allow a partnership between us and your parts company, which would give us access to Shiyo's battery division."

Though Shiyo Electric Co. was mainly known for its large home appliances, it had also gotten involved in batteries, the production of semiconductors and cellphones, and organic electroluminescence. This was the overinvestment that ended up bringing the company to its knees. That overinvestment had been stopped, meaning that selling the company off piece by piece was now an option.

"You wouldn't consider buying Shiyo Electric Co. as a whole?"

Shuuichi-shi shook his head. "Not that we don't have the money for it, but it would be too grand of an undertaking. It would take hundreds of billions of yen, if not a whole trillion. I know you're rich, Runa-kun, but right now you're involved in the bailouts of Hizen and Echigo, mergers between Sougou and Teisei, the purchase of KYOSHO Rapid Railway, *and* you've announced the construction of the Shikoku Shinkansen line. Isn't bailing out Shiyo on top of all that going to be difficult?"

"That's why I want to get its debts figured out now. We can get it all fixed up with only a few hundred billion yen if we act fast enough."

Just before this conversation, Tachibana had contacted me with a collective report from Shiyo's banks. That was all I needed to drive

out the company's founding family for good. I couldn't tell Shuuichi-shi this, but once that was finished, there was a particular division within Shiyo I planned to focus investment in: small liquid crystals for cellphones, whose demand was on the brink of blowing up. That would earn us enough to clean up the company's debts in one fell swoop, and then we would probably sell Shiyo off to some other appliance maker.

"I've been meaning to ask you this for a while, Runa-kun. Are you working on behalf of the government in your activities related to bad debts?"

"I cannot deny it. That is the very reason Keika Holdings was formed, after all. I suppose I'm a puppet of the government, in a way."

"Apparently, they're saying in Nagatachou that it's the prime minister who is being manipulated."

"Oh my. Who on earth could be spreading such lies?" I smiled and brought the conversation back on track. The current state of Nagatachou was like a burning cauldron of evil, squirming spirits, and I'd prefer not to discuss it if I could help it. "So buying Shiyo as a whole would be the worst option in your eyes?"

"Correct. As long as I've taught him as well as I think I have, Eiichi shouldn't suggest it either," Shuuichi-shi asserted. I couldn't tell if he had as much confidence in his son as in his hybrid automobiles, or if he was just soft on the former.

The next morning, I joined the breakfast table with the rest of the Teia family, where Eiichi-kun presented his proposal. For some reason, he chose just the moment I was drinking my grape juice.

"Hey, Runa. Wanna marry me?"

I spat out my grape juice quite spectacularly—the completely opposite of a ladylike sip. Eiichi-kun didn't react, instead going on to

give his reasoning. His explanation was too confident and logical to have been influenced by any sort of romantic feelings.

"Making an enemy of you wouldn't be smart, and I bet you've already figured out a solution to the problem. This'll be the best way to bring your answer in line with the Teia Group's interests."

Ignoring the rest of the astonished faces at the table, Kiichi-shi and Shuuichi-shi burst into raucous laughter at their kin's out-of-the-box response.

Only then did Eiichi-kun notice me wiping at my mouth with a napkin and trembling. "What's wrong, Runa? Is there a problem with my idea?"

He didn't have the first *clue* when it came to girls. I knew now that this would not be the last time I would need to tell him this.

"You're such an *idiot*, Eiichi-kun!"

"What? *Why?!*"

Things ended without a clear-cut decision on that particular front, but eventually Eiichi-kun correctly decided on *doing nothing*—which just made me more irritated about the whole thing.

Earlier…

I opened the door, making the bell above it ring throughout the café. The late afternoon was changing into evening, and the staff here were changing focus from drinks to food. I headed for my usual seat, only to find someone else had beaten me to it.

“Oh, Mitsuya-kun. May I sit here?”

“You would even if I said no, wouldn’t you? Go ahead.”

I’d just made it back after my long trip to America, and I was after a change of pace, so I came straight to Avanti. Mitsuya-kun was already there, reading a book. It was a title I recognized.

“Have you read this one?”

“Yes. The abrupt ending really leaves a lasting impression. I suppose I’d recommend this author’s other books as well.”

“You ‘suppose’?”

I couldn’t tell him that there would be no more books in the series. I smiled at him to cover my hesitation and ordered some chocolate truffles and a café latte.

“Where did you go for your long vacation?” Mitsuya-kun asked.

“America. I had some business there.” I took a book from my bag and started reading. We read quietly together, only pausing for snippets of conversation now and then.

“Why are you trying to cram so much into your life, Keikain?”

I turned a page in my book instead of answering. I had turned a few more by the time Mitsuya-kun spoke again.

“You go full speed in everything. Study, play, business…that’s not what kids do. That’s how adults live. We’re way past the time where people could be up and fighting twenty-four hours a day.”

“Are you talking about that old energy drink commercial? But yes, you’re right. If I get ill, that’ll be the end of it.” I grimaced and drank my coffee. It was sweet.

My previous life was not.

“Keikain. Do you know what the three of us like least about you?”

“That I’m too cute, too rich, and too upper class?”

“If that were true, we would have grown to outright hate you by now. The answer is that you’re growing up far faster than us,” Mitsuya-kun explained matter-of-factly.

I couldn’t help the small, curious smile that rose to my lips. I could tell by his reaction that he wanted to know what I found so amusing, so I fell back on a worn-out adage. “Girls are grown-up the moment they are born. Boys need time to become men, but *we* are already fully developed. I’m grateful for your concern, though. Thank you so very much.”

“And that’s what makes girls so sneaky.”

I grinned, watching as Mitsuya-kun flushed slightly, then I brought my hands together on the table and smiled sweetly without showing my teeth. This sort of fun back and forth was exactly why I came here after school.

“You get it. Then you should also know that it is the way of girls like me to get you to pay for their café lattes at times like this.”

“In that case, would you like me to treat you, my lady?”

“No thank you. I have to be able to cover costs like this for myself.”

We smiled at our little performance, and the conversation was over. It was nice to be so close to him. I changed the subject.

“Where are Eiichi-kun and Yuujirou-kun today?”

“Teia said he’d be late because of committee business. Izumikawa is, well. He’s almost busier than you these days.”

“Ah.”

He was the son of a prime minister, which meant his family got a lot of callers. I could imagine him right now, working hard to help entertain a guest at his family home in their electoral district. That even the proud leader of a caretaker government was this busy with guests just went to show how much sway a former prime minister had.

Then there was me, wanting to make the most of this gift I had been given.

“There’s still a lot I’d like to do while Prime Minister Izumikawa is in power.”

“I’m almost scared to ask, but…like what?” Mitsuya-kun narrowed his eyes at me, and I answered him without hesitation.

I’d also like to remind you at this point that yes, I was a grade-schooler.

“Oh, you know, I’d like to build a Shinkansen line in Shikoku.”

“You *are* a grade-schooler, right? Is it normal for grade-schoolers to build Shinkansen lines?”

The boys knew more or less what I was capable of, so luckily I had no problem handing the plans over to him. It was a four hundred billion yen project being discussed by two grade-schoolers in a café. Was there anything more absurd?

“I say Shikoku, but I only want to bring it to Takamatsu for the time being. The rest I’ll leave to the government over there.”

“What’s your estimated profit?”

“We’ll be making more than the planes, but we’ll only *just* be in the black, most likely. The Shinkansen isn’t what will be making us money.” I showed him a different plan; a plan for building more

Shinkansen platforms at Shin-Osaka station. I pointed at it. “These extra platforms are how we’ll make money. We’ll operate them as a category 3 railway business and assign them to the San’yo Shinkansen. Personally speaking, I want to build a Shinkansen just because. I don’t care what happens after that.”

“Why do you want to build it so badly?” Mitsuya-kun asked, his eyes still narrowed.

I decided to tell all. I doubted my smile had ever seemed as villainess-like as it did in that moment.

“The upcoming party leader election—I’m after the Shikoku vote.”

“I wish I hadn’t asked…”

Despite its low population, Shikoku had four prefectures, and it was an impregnable fortress of long-standing conservative influence. If I managed to win over Shikoku’s vote through this Shinkansen plan, then I could cash in the favors during the party leader election.

“Sorry I’m late. I’ll have my usual cola, please. Oh hey, you’re back, Runa.”

“That I am, Eiichi-kun.”

Those café afternoons with the boys were so, so dear to me.

“Sorry I took so long!”

I appeared in a yukata, and the boys’ reactions made me glad I’d put the effort in.

“Looks good on you, Runa. I’m guessing it’s based on your family’s crest? With the moon, multicolored flowers, and dark-blue background.”

“That’s right! It does suit me, doesn’t it?” I gave Eiichi-kun a twirl. This yukata was made-to-order from a kimono maker in Kyoto.

“That hairpin suits you too. What’s that green gem?”

“An emerald. I heard they found a raw one, so I had them make it into this ornament.” I touched my hand to the pin and its round, green stone, which complemented my golden hair. This was also made-to-order by an artisan in Kyoto.

“You’re a walking poster girl, Keikain. Nice work.”

“Thanks for the compliment. Teisei’s out-of-store sales department practically begged me…”

“Runa-chan! *Smile!*”

That photographer was back, leaping around me as he took photos from every angle while my wall of guards lined up behind me. I had never met anybody more annoying in all my life. Incidentally, my guards were all wearing pieces from Teisei too, each with a different design. Yukata and the like were already on sale at this point in the year, so I had to wonder whether it was really effective advertising.

“There’s no problem, actually. Remember that people are partial to you because you come from a duchy. Although, honestly speaking, it would have been a little more helpful to hold a photoshoot with you like this before yukata season started.”

My thought process must have been plain on my face. This was the head of Teisei’s out-of-store sales department, and he explained everything to me with a businesslike smile. As was obvious from his words, I wasn’t exactly dressing up like this out of choice.

Teisei’s supermarkets were being revamped thanks to the help of Hokkaido’s fresh produce, and its convenience stores were experiencing rapid growth thanks to their advantageous positions near the customers. Meanwhile, its department stores were still lagging behind from their post-bubble slump. They were trying all sorts of things to bring their customers back, but had eventually settled on using me, their poster girl. In a world where noble society

and zaibatsu still existed, a poster girl or boy from society's higher echelons could make all the difference to a company's sales.

"There's still some time before the fireworks show. Why don't we take a look at some of these stalls while we're here?"

We were attending the Sumidagawa Fireworks Festival. Today was the festival's opening, and my differently dressed guards were, in some way, an attraction of their own.

"Aren't we meeting a little early for this?" Eiichi-kun asked.

"We have to be early. If people found us looking at the stalls once the fireworks started, they'd start surrounding us." I wiped the sweat from my brow with my handkerchief and looked up at Tokyo's crimson sky. This was one of the capital's best festivals and the stalls opened early, meaning I could come here and enjoy some shopping with my guards when it wasn't so busy. Otherwise, I'd be making a spectacle of myself, being from the stratum of society that I was. "Let's start from the very first stall and make our way around!" I threw my hand in the air and led the three boys onward—but their attention had already been drawn by one particular stall.

Eiichi-kun rushed right up to it. "Fried chicken, huh? If only I could eat this stuff at home instead of from a tacky stall like this…mmm! It's so good!"

"Ha ha ha! What did you just call my stall, young man?" The stallholder smiled at Eiichi-kun.

"Oh, um…I'm sorry."

Apparently, the stallholder was a former head chef who enjoyed seeing nobles rush up to his stall and be surprised at how good his chicken was. People like him were part of the reason I couldn't keep myself away from festivals.

"Not goldfish fishing but 'yo-yo' fishing?" Eiichi-kun asked.

“When you release goldfish into the garden ponds they get eaten by the koi, hence the yo-yos,” Yuujirou-kun explained. “This is harder than I—ah!”

“Here you go: your consolation prize!”

“All right!” I cried. “It’s my turn next!”

We got so excited about the yo-yo fishing that it took us some time to come back to earth and realize we’d each accumulated a number of yo-yos we didn’t have much use for. There had to be a name for this kind of black magic.

“Wow! You got it in!”

“I didn’t know you had these sorts of skills, Mitsuya.”

“It’s not that impressive, Teia.”

“You missed again, Eiichi-kun!”

“Argh! Get me another set of rings!”

Eiichi-kun was no good at the ring toss. He kept aiming for the big prizes and buying more turns whenever he messed up. It was a never-ending cycle.

It wasn’t so much that Mitsuya-kun was skilled, but that he went for the prizes he could reliably get without overshooting. By the end of it, his paper bag was filled with a decent collection of small toys and candy.

“Let’s get shaved ice next!” I declared.

“Sure. I’ll have melon,” Eiichi-kun said.

“Melon? But lemon’s *clearly* the superior choice.”

“I think you mean milk and red bean.”

As we argued by the shaved ice stand, my guards swiftly got into position, ready to protect us—it seemed the media had caught wind of us.

“Aww. I guess this is where our fun ends.”

“Don’t sweat it, Runa. We can just get our butlers to grab some shaved ice for us later.”

“Let’s hurry,” Yuujirou-kun urged. “The people around us are starting to talk.”

“This is why everyone hates the media…” I grumbled.

My guards led our retreat, and I heard the voices of reporters clamoring from behind us. I knew they were just doing their job, but it’d be nice if they’d be a little more considerate from time to time.

“Keikain-san! We’d like to ask you a few questions!”

I ignored them and got into the car for our next destination.

“We have arrived, my lady.”

The car stopped and my door was opened to reveal a houseboat. If we couldn’t stay at the festival, I was determined to treat everyone to a fireworks display from the boat. We had food and drink, and if anyone caught us *here*, we could simply escape down the river to the Keika Securities head office.

“Let’s not worry about the reporters and their cameras! Let’s just enjoy the show from here on the boat.”

Night had fallen completely now, and the fireworks were just getting started as our boat reached the display. This city was gorgeous enough at ground level, but it was the beautiful colors in the sky that took everyone’s breath away.

“They’re so pretty,” I breathed.

“Yeah,” Eiichi-kun agreed.

“You’re not wrong,” Yuujirou-kun followed.

“They’re amazing,” Mitsuya-kun finished off.

The wind played on the windchimes of the boat, ringing a merry summer song. That melody was quickly swallowed up by the spectacular fireworks above, but it stuck fast in my mind. The crowd

cheered every time another firework was launched from the riverbank.

"Let's come see this again next year, Runa."

I didn't register the earnest tone to Eiichi-kun's voice. I simply nodded in response, my mind taken over by the magic of summer. The finance world was poised to go through the fires of hell, and I was about to dive right into the middle of it all—yet here I was.

"Yes, let's."

My words sounded so transient, so heart-wrenchingly wistful, it was as if somebody else entirely had spoken them.

I'd bet that most people would have wanted to say something like this at some point in their lives:

"What? *Actually*, owning a villa is a lot of hard work. You can only live there a few days out of the year, and then you have the maintenance costs. Plus, you start feeling like you *have* to make use of it, simply because you've got it."

I'd always wanted to say that in my previous life, but I'd woken up from that dream, and now I was in Karuizawa. The day was just getting started, and I was at the Keikain family villa.

"Good morning, my lady. Are you heading out for a walk this morning?" Tachibana enquired when he saw my jogging outfit.
I waved a hand at him in response. We were high above sea level out here, so the morning was cool and crisp.

"Yes, I'm just in the mood for it." I put my MD Walkman in my shoulder pouch and stepped outside. The maids bowed as I passed them, and after making sure I had one guard in front and one behind, I switched my Walkman on. In this era, we still used minidiscs.

I listened to my favorite music, only half keeping to the rhythm as I walked through the villa's surroundings. In terms of escorts, I had

Tachibana, three maids, and three more guards back at the villa. There was also an unmarked police car with two officers inside stationed a little farther away from the building. Personally, I found it a bit much for protecting a single grade-schooler, but I wasn't about to complain; I *had* almost been kidnapped once before.

"Contact Tachibana. Have him make sure the police officers guarding me get a meal as well. They likely can't come into the villa itself, so have the maids deliver them sandwiches and coffee."

One of the guards called back to the villa and passed on my instructions.

The silence of Karuizawa in the morning mist was idyllic, so I switched off my Walkman. The sounds of nature were the perfect soundtrack for a morning like this.

"What's for breakfast today?"

"A traditional Japanese breakfast, milady: rice with miso soup and toasted seaweed. There is also pickled *nozawana* and broiled salted salmon. We have your usual grape juice as well. Will that suffice?"

"I'll have the juice later. I'd like green tea with my breakfast instead."

"Certainly, my lady. What would you like for dessert?"

"Pineapple and melon with yogurt."

Once I was done with breakfast, I was to study for the rest of the morning. School wasn't exactly challenging for me right now, so I'd been working on English and junior-high level math. It was surprising how much I'd forgotten of both, so I was taking these two subjects seriously. My problem subjects were history and geography, which I was learning from scratch.

This world's history was completely different from the world I knew, so I needed to relearn all of it. I needed to learn it in

meticulous detail too; if I didn't, it would be too easy to mix up this world's history with that of my old world. It was necessary to get to a point where I could clearly and definitively distinguish between the two.

Geography was different too: this world's national borders weren't the same as I knew them, and neither was every place name. The changes in history had affected the borders in Europe, Asia, and Africa, changing place names too. Also, if I was going to help implement economic measures, it was vital to know what kind of factories were located where and what the specialties for each region were. Plus, since the noble system still survived in this world, I also needed to know the history of each family to facilitate my relationships with them. This made these two subjects even more important. I needed to know about noble cliques, who was married to whom, and how to best get the economy moving. I knew full well just how significant a marriage between two families could be, to the extent that the thought of offering myself as a sacrifice to rescue a zaibatsu had crossed my mind before. It was a powerful move that had the potential to change the course of history—hence why I couldn't neglect these studies.

"Let's leave it here for now. What's for lunch?"

"Sandwiches and tea. Also, your vocal coach is due to arrive promptly at 2 p.m."

Ever since I started working with the Teia International Philharmonic Orchestra, I took lessons with one of their vocal instructors now and then. It took more than pure talent to make a living for oneself in this world, but I was the main antagonist, so my vocal cords weren't restrained by such rules. I knew what my teacher would say once our lesson was up.

"I wanted to talk to you about this summer's concert."

"I respectfully decline."

“Supper will be chicken, corn soup, salad, and rice.”

The supper menu was my request. Instead of a fancy meal, I’d picked out something you’d find at a diner. Truly, my soul had been shaped by the financial struggles of my previous life.

There was nothing scheduled for the evening, so I simply lay on my bed reading manga.

“I thought this manga came out later than this.”

And then I was done. Time for bed.

Goodnight…

Though summer was coming to an end, the temperature was still scalding hot, and the radio continued to play the same summer song. Luckily, I wasn’t particularly busy.

“I think today I’ll go to the pool.”

My decision was made in that split second. My pool of choice belonged to Keika Hotels—not a public pool, but one reserved for executives. The common people played around in the pool on the fifth-floor roof with barely enough room between them, but as a shareholder, I didn’t have to settle for that.

Tachibana made all the arrangements for me and escorted me into the elevator, hidden further inside the building, that would take us up to the very top floor. On that floor was an indoor pool, perfectly ready for me. I was here more to cool off than to have a proper swim, so I floated back to the surface almost as soon as I jumped into the water, then flopped down poolside. I was in my school swimsuit, but there was no one there to see me, so I didn’t care how I looked. There was also a cream soda ready for me on the table.

I was lounging on the beach chair when Tachibana approached and passed me a towel.

“My apologies. The paparazzi appear to be here, so I’ll have to ask you to step back inside for now.”

I took the towel and wrapped it around my body, gazing out of the window at the cluster of high-rise buildings opposite. The hotel was shorter than the skyscrapers around it, meaning even its highest floor was visible from them. The private pool was surrounded by bulletproof glass to prevent attacks, but that glass did nothing to protect against an army of eager cameras.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have flaunted my name so much. Are they who I think they are?”

“Most likely.”

I made my American debut as a mysterious girl who showed up to the Republican National Convention and—as a result—caught the attention of the paparazzi over there. These kinds of photos sold for much more over there, so it was worth them coming all the way to Japan. Being popular was truly a curse and definitely not a blessing.

“They might be waiting for me downstairs then.”

“It will take some time to clear them out, so I’d like to ask you to dine here tonight.”

I readily agreed to Tachibana’s suggestion. This probably wouldn’t escalate into anything.

Or so I thought.

After Tachibana made his report to the police, the investigation results they came back with had me tearing my hair out. Apparently, there were people who shouldn’t have been there among the group peeping into the hotel pool from one of the nearby skyscrapers. Someone had allowed them access into a restricted area. A group of suspicious foreigners was also captured clearly on the building’s security cameras.

I gasped as I read that report.

Paparazzi came in several flavors: they all took photos of celebrities to sell, but the difference was in *who* they photographed. One of America's most powerful paparazzi classes was made up of the ones who snapped Hollywood stars. Those actors needed to remain topical for their movies to sell, so like it or not, their fates were tied to the paparazzi.

The European paparazzi—chiefly the British paparazzi—were more of a problem. They went crazy for their royal families, so much so that their efforts sometimes exceeded those of spies working for the government. They weren't concerned with following to the law.

"This means I've finally caught the attention of the less-than-scrupulous type of paparazzi."

Apparently I had become somewhat popular in Britain once they found out about my blood connection to the House of Romanov. The Moonlight Fund's vast profits had been mistaken for Romanov treasure, and now the country rippled with excitement about the spoils existing in the far east. They'd even heard about the kidnapping attempt on me by a Russian organization after the treasure.

"They know *this* much?"

Japanese organizations were unique in that they had a tough counterintelligence approach to outsiders, but once you were in, they were much laxer about spilling the beans because you were "one of them." I could only assume that the magnitude of leaks was down to the paparazzi bribing some destitute noble family. They had probably spoken about my involvement in politics and business too, but the paparazzi hadn't believed them and so that part wasn't passed on. They'd bungled the truth into nothing but useless information.

“My lady, Director Maefuji of the police’s Public Safety Bureau’s Foreign Affairs Section would like to see you in relation to this matter.”

“Director?”

Sounded like somebody was moving up in the world. Unless I was mistaken, the title of Director came packaged with that of Superintendent. He had been told never to interfere with my family again, but he still made appointments like this when he felt it necessary. The man knew no fear—perhaps because he knew I couldn’t refuse him.

“All right. I shall see him.”

Ten minutes later, Director Maefuji Shouichi was standing in front of me without a hint of shame in his expression.

“Would you like me to congratulate you on your promotion?” I offered.

“I owe that to a certain someone, to whom I am very grateful. I’m allowed to get involved in much more than foreign affairs now, but that’s a trade secret.”

Once the formalities were dealt with, Director Maefuji passed on a warning to me regarding the suspicious characters spotted among the paparazzi in the building’s security footage.

“After an anonymous tip, we were successful in arresting the paparazzi themselves.”

It sounded like there was no more risk of my swimsuit shots being released out into the world. Relief swept through me. Director Maefuji put a hand to his temple before going into further detail on the anonymous source.

“Our informants seem to have been in the American embassy. They rang from its general phone number. We checked the security cameras around the embassy…” Director Maefuji placed a

photograph on the table. It showed the same group of foreigners who had been caught on the security footage from the building near the hotel.

"They sold out their buddies?" I asked.

"They may have been planning to do so from the very beginning. When we were looking into this group, we came across something very interesting indeed."

"And what was that?" I checked the list of names on the file Director Maefuji passed me and found that they had very reassuring backgrounds indeed—specifically, they worked in developing countries that conflict had plunged into ruin. They were foreign mercenaries who had come to Japan.

"Were they out to kidnap me?" I asked as I looked over the file.

Director Maefuji smirked and handed me another document. "If they were, they wouldn't have left such an obvious trail."

They had claimed tourism as their purpose of visit. Fair enough, I supposed—but in truth they had already been hired as security for a major American business. Once I read on and discovered that the business was a general contractor which dealt in water (among other things), I realized this document was much more important than I initially thought.

"Oh dear." I tried to keep my voice light, but I was already massaging my temples. The announcement by General Energy Online sprang to mind. The business described in the file had its headquarters in California too. "They couldn't have made a more obvious threat if they'd tried…" It was like a gang announcing that this was *their* turf now. And all of this had just made it easier for them to expand into Japan.

"Seeing as you have mostly finished disposing of the bad debts held by the finance and logistics sectors, I assume your next focus will be on the bad debts of general contractors and real estate firms.

Given their connections in technology and regulation, the fastest and easiest way for them to do trade over here is probably to buy up one of the general contractors that's struggling with bad debts."

The bad debts held by general contractors and real estate companies often had links to the yakuza's forays into land speculation, among other "ventures."

Now I understood. This was the sort of thing beyond foreign affairs that Director Maefuji was working on. And they were keeping an eye on me now as well.

I decided it would be best to replace the windows around that pool with a one-way mirror.

"Maids?"

Toudou nodded, placing a stack of resumes on the table before me. "Correct, my lady. You'll be entering your final years of elementary school soon. I believe it is the right time for you to select some attendants."

Nobility's survival in this world meant it was common for the upper classes to have personal maids. I wasn't sure whether to be grateful for that or not. I may have been living in a video game, but it was very much reality to me, and sometimes that reality was inescapable in particularly unpleasant ways. My only outlet was to sigh.

"You're more likely to be recommended for a scholarship in the junior-high level the closer your upbringing is to that of a typical noble or zaibatsu family. Is that right?"

"Correct. I am already your butler, but your businesses have seen such growth that it is difficult to wait on you all the hours of the day. The time has come for you to choose people of your own to make use of." Tachibana agreed with Toudou, who sat next to him.

It somehow felt more like I was expected to select attendants as a samurai would, rather than maids. Perhaps this was because daimyo were a type of nobility themselves. Indeed, the staff I would choose today would be there to protect and accompany me until the day I died. That was the idea at least, but I didn't recognize any of these potential attendants from the game at all.

"Can't I pick from my friends at school?"

"They may be happy answering to you now, but in the end, their loyalties will lie with their houses. You ought to pick people who will stay with you dutifully until the very end."

Studying their resumes, I noticed a commonality between the candidates: most of them were orphans. It was almost like a publicity stunt showing noblesse oblige in action, and a way to surround the superior people with those who would show their gratitude by serving them. It meant there was little risk of these candidates betraying me.

"Hm?"

"Is something the matter, my lady?"

"Oh, no. It's nothing."

Katsuki Shiori-san was among the candidates. I didn't realize she was related to the Keikain House. Suddenly, something felt off. Keikain Runa was picking out a group of close associates right now—so why did she face her downfall all alone in the game?

"Oh!" I clapped my hands together as the answer came to me: in the game, the Keikain House was on its way down.

The bad debts from my father's Far Eastern Group had put the family in a bind, and they only managed to deal with those debts by merging their main breadwinner, Keika Pharmaceuticals, with Iwazaki Pharma. The conditions of the deal had not been favorable, however, and after that their earnings fell steadily. I was used as a pawn, thrust into the middle of the three dateable characters in the

hopes of forming a political marriage and finding some way out of that mess. Instead, I met my ruin. Since the bad debt was being dealt with this time around, the whole marriage strategy might have changed.

"How many attendants am I getting?"

"Taking breaks and illness into account, ten or so should cover you," Toudou said casually.

I half-smiled—wasn't ten a bit much for him to be using that tone of voice? Other families started assigning their children attendants around junior high, with some getting four or five at the more extreme end of the spectrum. One or two was normal—ten meant you were usually dealing with the daughter of a major zaibatsu. I supposed I was technically daughter to a dukedom, though; when he said ten, he meant it.

"You don't think ten is a bit much?" I prompted.

"Quite frankly, I don't think it's *enough*."

It was telling—and unsettling—that the assignment of three maids at once, with an extra one in reserve, was not considered enough for an upper-class girl like me. School wasn't just about enjoying romance and youth; it was a place to search for a marriage partner who would elevate your family, and a place to defeat your rivals. When you considered the female clique I was in at school, plus all of their attendants, I was already constantly surrounded by more than ten girls at any one time.

There was something incredibly distasteful about all of this, especially framing it in the context of my family struggling to retain its power.

"Does this mean I'm getting more guards and regular maids too?"

"Correct. The plan is to assign you more of them once the construction work on the Kudanshita building is complete."

The estate I was living in belonged to the Keikain family, and my staff—that was, Tachibana and my handful of maids—were hired by the main family and came in on rotation. Once the Kudanshita building was finished and became my main residence, I would inevitably need more staff around me. According to Toudou, hiring them now would give us a change to be sure of their loyalty before the building was complete.

"So the plan is to promote my current maids to housekeepers and employ general maids from an agency to work beneath them? Then we'll have some girls around my age attend to me and learn from the maids while they're in the house, increasing their loyalty to raise them into future attendants?"

"Precisely"

"An agency… Perhaps I'll buy the agency outright if we're going that route."

Economic trends followed demand. There were some personnel agencies that, by modern standards, would be considered exploitative for their aggressive methods of training their maids—but those methods helped them keep the maids suitable to work for noble and zaibatsu families.

We would hire from an agency to ensure our maids had the high-level skills required for such specialist work. Their work would include receiving visitors, keeping a high standard of manners, serving supper, knowing about various brands and types of tea leaves and coffee beans, handling and maintaining works of art, keeping strict levels of confidentiality, and so forth. It wasn't a vocation you could just hire any old housewife for; these were specialized individuals.

This was also an example of a job it took a long time to get good at. At the center of my household would be a group of all-rounders

who, thanks to developments in household appliances, could do practically everything. I would hire a professional chef separately.

I was handed a document concerning hiring the guards that had been mentioned, and the topic of maids was put on hold. I smirked a little at its contents: the agency we would hire maids from and the agency we would hire guards from was one and the same.

“Isn’t this a private military company?”

“It is indeed. I thought it necessary, considering your current devotion to the resources sector,” Toudou replied lightly.

Many of the countries I was focusing on in my resource exploits weren’t exactly safe. I could only admire the Japanese workers who traveled to do business in places like that, and the necessity of a private organization to protect them was clear to me—particularly because the police in those countries were usually bought out by the mafia or other criminal groups.

Here in Japan, there were agencies that hired out guards. That the personal security industry was established here really spoke to how this world’s Japan wasn’t afraid of trading blood for money. It wasn’t like the Japan of my previous life, where the people would immediately withdraw when things got unpleasant, allowing recession and public unrest to flare up in their absence like a house abandoned by its protective spirit. It was instead a country unified by its righteousness, whose members would not hesitate to use armed might in the name of national interest.

“I see this private military company has its headquarters in Sapporo…” I hummed thoughtfully.

Karafuto had fallen into Japan’s hands during the post-Cold War confusion, and there were disputes with Russia about returning the northern part of the prefecture to them. It was during this unrest that the company defended Karafuto, making a big deal of the fact they weren’t affiliated with the government, and now it intervened

as a foreign legion in disputes all over the world. Incidentally, the company members were former citizens of Northern Japan looking to improve their position in this country.

"All right. We won't bother with contracts. Let's just buy up the company itself. Akamatsu's resource division will run it."

I accepted Toudou's proposal to hire more staff in part because of the sinister figures lurking behind the paparazzi. It wasn't until I made the order to buy the company and make the guards my pawns that I realized I never even stopped to consider the value of money these days.

"Yes, my lady. Now, this may be a little ahead of schedule, but I would like to introduce you to somebody. You may come in now."

Tachibana's words summoned a young girl around the same age as me. She looked very much like him, though I couldn't quite pinpoint in what way.

"My lady, this is my granddaughter, Yuka. I intend for her to be your maid from junior high on."

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, my lady.” There was a dignified lilt to her tone and an elegance to her smile as she bowed to me.

Two thoughts crossed my mind. The first was that she would probably end up my closest attendant.

The second? That it was odd she wasn’t wearing a maid uniform.

The winter vacation was only just over when our Quartet was summoned to Keika Holdings’ head office in Kayabacho after school. We sat on the couch in the boardroom on its top floor. I had a room of my own on this floor too, but we weren’t using it this time.

“Welcome. Please, relax and make yourselves at home.” Ichijou, the CEO, greeted us with a professional smile, ignoring the glare I shot him.

“You called us about the boys’ business, didn’t you?”

“That’s right. I sent your business plan to Silicon Valley and am awaiting their feedback, but it looks extremely positive so far, so I was asked to do a review. Teia Shuuichi-sama, head of the Teia Group, has also entrusted me with this task.”

He wasted no time in laying the groundwork. Our plan was to send our website to Silicon Valley, get them to evaluate it, and then sell it off to Teia Motor Co.’s development department. I wanted to invest myself, but gave up when Eiichi-kun explained that, since it would eventually go to Teia Motor Co. anyway, *they* would pay for it. Right now it was just important what Silicon Valley thought.

“We could have the best idea and plan in the world, but we’re no match for the programming whizzes in the industry. We’ll make easier money just coming up with the idea and selling it off. All we really wanted was enough to cover our PHS bills.”

Selling the idea to the development department would earn us a few hundred thousand yen per person. Far too much for your average grade-schooler, but barely enough when it came to our households, which were used to spending those sums of money.

“This won’t be money that was just handed to us. This will be money we earned by building something from the ground up. That’s what makes it so valuable, Keikain.”

I tried to intervene, to tell them they could be doing so much more, but Mitsuya-kun’s earnest words shut me up pretty quickly. It wasn’t difficult in our economy to turn one yen into a hundred or a thousand. But when it came from turning zero into one, you needed an inordinate amount of effort and luck. Mitsuya-kun understood this perfectly. That was why he took more pride in their work being recognized by adults than in the amount of money they’d make.

“I’d like to ask that we be allowed to do this all by ourselves, Keikain-san. This will allow us to ascertain whether we’re worthy of standing shoulder to shoulder with you.”

I could tell that the three of them had been brought up to stick to their values and business goals. That impressed me, although I didn’t say as much out loud. I did wonder why, if I was stepping back, Ichijou of all people was doing the loan review here. But I had a more pressing question I wanted to ask him.

“Your perceptiveness astounds me. Eiichi-kun and the others were never mentioned by name, yet you identified them as the brains behind the project anyway.”

The goal was to get an honest evaluation, so the boys avoided putting their names on it so that they would be judged solely by the plan and website itself. I wanted to know how the entire scheme had reached Ichijou in the first place.

He maintained a professional smile as he placed a glass of grape juice in front of me and served each boy their favorite drink in turn.

“As I teach my subordinates, when it comes to staying afloat of important information, you cannot let the less significant details pass you by. Your informants are not necessarily the best judges of the information they share with you. Even the seemingly unimportant details can become substantial when combined with other scraps of information.” Ichijou paused for breath. It was like a lecture from an industry insider—and I could see the boys were watching him with very serious looks on their faces.

“Most importantly, if you keep excluding information you believe to be worthless, it will fade away and the facts you do hold won’t become any clearer. Those at the top cannot afford to ignore details because they’re too busy, or that the details themselves are uninteresting. It was those values which led me to this plan of yours.”

“Can I ask something?” Eiichi-kun’s face and tone were solemn. He hadn’t even touched the cola in front of him. “Wouldn’t it be easy to drown in a sea of information if you paid attention to absolutely everything? How do you avoid that?”

“That’s what your staff is for. Staff take the information and organize it for you. Now that we are in the age of the internet, I don’t doubt that information is going to start reaching us faster and faster—and that there will be a lot more of it. Having specialized staff when that happens will be vital.”

I was happy to see that Yuujirou-kun had started taking notes. Mitsuya-kun was… That looked like a small tape recorder. This was no longer *like* a lecture—it *was* one now.

“I caught this particular plan because I instruct my staff to bring me anything Her Ladyship becomes involved in. Tachibana-shi and I are the ones who control her money, you see. This plan in particular was unique. Her Ladyship likes to make decisions and take action without wasting any time. Being asked to do the loan review did not

arouse my suspicions, but the fact that an evaluation was being sought for the project, and nothing else, did. In other words, it was a project that could make a profit without Her Ladyship's involvement. If she herself were not involved, then it must have involved her close associates."

So Ichijou had followed the scraps of clues left behind to arrive at the truth. I wondered if he had been a great detective before he became a banker. He certainly had the skills required.

"When I saw that the website included in the plan concerned automobiles, and I found out Her Ladyship was close with Teia-kun, everything fell into place. My final step was to contact the head of the Teia Group just to be sure."

All the boys were looking at Ichijou with reverence in their expressions now. I probably had the exact same look on my face.

“As Her Ladyship already knows, I used to work for Far Eastern Bank, a regional bank. I was always thorough in this variety of financing work for small companies, and that was how I gained the position of branch manager for the bank’s Tokyo branch.” Ichijou’s professional smile was sweeter than before, and I knew all four of us felt a chill run down our spines. This was him teaching us how to carry out a company review—and do it properly. Or perhaps he just *called* it a company review, and he had really been looking into the boys.

“You have thirty minutes. Convince me why your project deserves to be financed.”

“You may not say anything, my lady. This is *their* project.”

Ichijou was still smiling serenely. His warning was a hint in itself; would the boys notice? The rules of society were not taught clearly, nor did they come in a manual. There were also rules buried deeper beneath the surface.

It was Mitsuya-kun who caught on first. “Keikain, please don’t involve yourself in our conversation with Ichijou-shi. Instead, answer me this, as a friend. You’ve passed through Ichijou-shi’s loan review before, right?”

I nodded firmly. Ichijou told me not to say anything, and I wasn’t outright saying a thing. It was a rule he’d set for this game, and the key to winning would be in how the boys made use of my help.

“You raised the capital for the Moonlight Fund yourself, Keikain-san. It’s no wonder this bank has caused such a stir in the political and financial worlds,” Yuujirou-kun murmured.

“That’s a good start. I see that you’re removing the obstacles in your way carefully. Just don’t forget the time limit,” Ichijou said, amusement coloring his tone.

Speaking to him and the boys had taught me something. The rally of a conversation between intelligent people was faster, and more enjoyable, than a normal chat. The Iwazaki Group had swallowed up much of the Keika Group, and yet the companies *I* bought still operated under the Keika name. It would seem odd to anyone, but I bet Yuujirou-kun had worked out why. He knew me, after all. How many times had I mentioned a multi-hundred billion yen purchase in front of him and the others? It was only a matter of time before they noticed the pattern.

"If you passed a review before, that means you had collateral. The one thing I can think of is land. We don't have land, so that's not an option for us."

Other families knew of my parents' scandal, and so it was easy to rule out that I had any guarantors either. I knew Eiichi-kun had worked this out from the brilliant smile he faced Ichijou with.

"*We* have guarantors. We can borrow using our parents' names as credit. How much are you willing to lend us then?"

"One billion for an unsecured, low-interest loan."

Ichijou's instant answer must have imparted the importance of their parents onto the boys all over again. They probably realized how powerless they were as children—and how incredible a feat it would be to reach the same positions as their fathers. As someone who had experienced adulthood once before, I was maddeningly wistful for that childlike awe.

"How much would you lend if we borrowed under our own names on just the strength of our idea?" Eiichi-kun pressed.

"I would lend you some *advice*: go away and come back once you're adults. That much is standard across Japan's financial institutions."

They now had a confirmed method of borrowing the money—and a hint toward a different path. What a lot of people didn't realize

was that financial institutions *wanted* to lend out their capital. They made their profit by borrowing and gathering money, then lending it out again at a higher rate. Without lending, they wouldn't make a single cent. If the company they lent to then went bankrupt, and they couldn't get their money back, they were in trouble; that was why Japan's financial institutions asked for collateral such as land or a guarantor. This was based on an amusing misconception: that land and stock value always went up. So these institutions grew complacent, which was how they ended up with their mountains of bad debts.

"Would you dismiss us, even if the people in Silicon Valley valued our idea highly?" Yuujirou-kun asked.

"In that case, a financial institution would look at your business' endurability. We want you to grow a money tree. It would not be worth lending to you if your company made its profit but burned out only a short time later," Ichijou warned him gently.

I studied the boys' faces; it seemed they were starting to see the problems.

"Then our main bottlenecks are the fact that we are children, and the question of how long our business will survive," Mitsuya-kun said.

"Precisely." Ichijou clapped his hands approvingly.

There were still ways around those problems. I was interested to see if they could identify any of them.

"The idea was always to sell this plan off to Teia's development department anyway, so it's not a long-term thing," Eiichi-kun said.

"Yes it is—it's online. The information needs to be constantly updated, which means we'll need long-term staff to do just that," Mitsuya-kun pointed out. "And we're the ones who know the website better than anyone."

“Which means we can take on the work as the website’s staff. That should be enough to prove our project is long-term.”

These boys never ceased to amaze me. Eiichi-kun pointed out the problem, Mitsuya-kun came up with a solution, and Yuujirou-kun brought it all together to come up with a realistic path forward. They say two (or in this case, three) heads are better than one, but the effect was tenfold when those heads contained the unfair abilities of three main characters.

“The last problem is the obvious fact that we’re children,” Eiichi-kun said.

“There has to be a solution to that too. If we have the money lent to an official of the company rather than us, no one will suspect a thing.”

“It will be a startup by a group of elementary children…” Yuujirou-kun mused.

At this point, they must have been able to see the finish line.

Ichijou watched their deliberations with amusement in his eyes.

“How much of their progress did you already foresee?” I asked under my breath.

“I trusted that they would succeed. They are *your* friends, my lady,” Ichijou replied unabashedly. He could have used a different tone, but his words pleased me nonetheless.

“Let’s start a web development company in Nevada, then take over the work on Teia Motor Co.’s mobile site here in the ‘Japan office.’ We’ll ‘delegate’ that work to Teia Eiichi, son of Teia Shuuichi, head of the Teia Group. That will highlight it as a deal struck with Teia Motor Co., and then if any web developers approach us with an offer to buy, we can start negotiations. With that as our business plan, how much would we be able to borrow?”

There was just under five minutes of their half hour left when Eiichi-kun struck the correct answer.

Ichijou passed him documents on startup investment and the legal details. His evaluation of the boys was now set. “I can offer you an unsecured loan of a hundred million yen at a 2 percent interest rate. If you name your father as a guarantor, I can offer you one billion at a 0.5 percent interest. Select whichever option you prefer.”

Triumphant smiles appeared on the faces of all three boys. I bet they didn’t just feel like they’d made it as adults, but like they’d made it as *important* adults.

Eiichi-kun finally took a sip of his cola, and then turned to me. “Runa. You seem pretty interested in this business. How much d’you wanna offer for it?”

Ichijou and I exchanged a glance. But Eiichi-kun was absolutely right, and I had no choice but to yield.

“How did you get a loan from Ichijou-shi anyway, Keikain-san?”

“I went over to his bank’s Tokyo branch, asked to see the balance sheet, checked how they were doing on their bad debts, then mortgaged my estate for five hundred million yen.”

“And how old were you when you did this, Keikain?”

“*That* is a secret. Come on guys, don’t look so awkward.”

“You mean you started with five hundred million, and now you’ve got this Moonlight Fund worth a *trillion* yen? No wonder everyone’s going on about Romanov treasures.”

On the vast grounds of Imperial Gakushuukan Academy were several donated buildings. The reasons behind their construction varied from a show of power to a philanthropic deed and everything

in between. Among those buildings was one called the Courtiers' Hall. It was the citadel of the academy's noble clique.

"Welcome, Keikain-san! We're so happy to have you!"

"Thank you ever so much for the invitation, Asagiri-san."

We smiled and greeted each other politely. The people around us from other cliques were staring with smiles glued to their faces. Female friendship was a battle, a way of securing your place in the pecking order.

"Please, everyone, have a seat for the time being. Tea will be served in a moment."

"Thank you. I brought apple pie for everyone. Please, help yourselves."

I'd mobilized my own faction for this tea party. There were my close friends, Asuka-chan, Hotaru-chan, and Mio-chan, and two new additions to my circle, Takahashi Akiko-san and Kurimori Shizuka-san, for a total of five.

Asagiri-san, meanwhile, had gathered these girls to greet me: Machiyoi Sanae-san, Katsuki Shiori-san, and Shisuka Lydia-senpai.

I'd invited Katsuki Shiori-san myself, but she'd refused because, as a daughter of Viscount Katsuki, she was already one of the Courtiers. I saw Shisuka Lydia-senpai's appearance as a message from the Iwazaki Group, which was deeply involved in the Karafuto situation, that they were willing to watch over her.

I was sure there were senior students in other rooms within the hall waiting eagerly for the results of this gathering.

Mio-chan, the youngest, passed the Teisei-branded box of apple pie over to Katsuki Shiori-san. A similar offering of Teisei apple pie should be happening right around now in every other room. It was simple—and very effective—to be this generous, as long as I had the

money. If it ran out, I'd be abandoned, so I needed to keep an eye on my funds.

"Oh, this is delicious!" Katsuki Shiori-san sacrificed herself for the taste test. Once Asagiri-san had seen it was okay, she ate some herself. Likewise, I waited for Hotaru-chan to drink some tea from her cup before I had any myself.

These extreme manners were a feature of privileged female (or demonic, if you will) gatherings, and nowadays were more morbid and annoying than anything else.

"May I ask your reason for inviting me here?" I asked.

"Of course. There are three reasons. One is a public reason. The second is a private reason. The third is a very pointless reason. Which would you like me to start with?" Asagiri-san offered with a brilliant smile. I kept up my own smile in return.

Neither of our smiles reached our eyes.

"Why don't you start from the *beginning*?" I suggested.

Whichever I picked, I knew the story would come out in the order she wanted it to. A single look from Asagiri-san to the girls attending to her had them retreating. I did the same to my own friends, so that Asagiri-san and I could speak one on one. This was part of the etiquette.

"The first reason is that we would like to extend you an official offer to join the Courtiers."

The meeting itself was purely arbitrary. Having said that, I remembered myself leading these Courtiers around during the game. It seemed that we all met our ruin, facing criticism because of our position, but that wasn't described in the game.

"I don't understand. I may have been officially adopted into the main Keikain Dukedom now, but that doesn't mean everyone has reason to accept me."

“We do, and a very obvious one at that—your *wealth*.” Asagiri-san’s voice was crisp and clear as she spoke, and I let out a quiet scoff. I did wonder about the Courtiers’ Hall itself—it was a little old-fashioned in its architecture. “We nobles cannot live on our name and honor alone. Especially when it comes to salons.” Asagiri-san surveyed the room, wistfulness in her gaze. “They are planning to reconstruct this building.”

As I recalled, the Building Standards Act was reformed last year in response to the Great Hanshin Earthquake, raising the earthquake-resistance requirements for many buildings. If this building was to be reconstructed, they would need the money to do it. Hence why they had come to me, the richest noble at the school.

“What is in it for me if I join?” I asked.

“Support from the Privy Council and friendship with the Iwazaki Group. Support in getting approval if you ever wanted to create an independent state.”

Asagiri-san’s words were so suspicious that I had to smirk a little. I also realized the problematic subject of Northern Karafuto’s return had become as contentious as it was for my sake—the sake of a mere pawn. If my deduction was right, it was so I could be rewarded for the countless good deeds I’d done for this country by being allowed my own country within Northern Karafuto. There was no reason to believe my actions were selfless with the endless impurity of human beings, so those in high society must have assumed my goal was to reestablish both my Japanese House and the Russian House of Romanov by starting my own nation. I sighed, knowing nobody would believe that my inaction had led to an even more dire situation for this country.

Asagiri-san noticed. “Oh? Does that displease you?”

“We are grade-schoolers. We should have no interest in ‘establishing nations’ outside our childish dreams.”

“You are right—we *are* still in grade school at present. But how about five years in the future? Or ten? That is what I am referring to, Keikain-san.”

Five years—or even a decade—was a long time when it came to somebody’s lifespan, but nothing at all when it came to the annals of history. I could see it now: queen of a kingdom in Northern Karafuto a mere ten years in the future.

“Let us consider that possibility a joke. However, I would like some contributions for my repair work on this building.”

“Thank you, Keikain-san. Feel free to come here whenever you wish when the work is done.”

Fishy as it seemed, everything we’d spoken of up till that point was above board. I therefore expected the “private reason” to be even more questionable.

“Could we talk about the private reason now?” I prompted.

“Of course. It is related to what we’ve already spoken about. It concerns your future marriage partner.”

I had to drink my tea to hide the expression on my face. That topic at this age *was* questionable. At the same time, it was quite reasonable. I was a girl, and due to my gender, I would be expected to marry at some point. I would be perfectly happy by myself, but my status and money demanded I find myself a husband eventually.

“You realize, don’t you? Building a country means you will need a husband, or else your family will end with a single generation. You can expect proposals from men not just in Japan, but from all over the world.”

“And if I want to avoid that, I should find myself a suitable fiancé as soon as possible, yes?”

A political marriage of convenience—something that was quite common in ancient Japan and Europe. Kiyomaro-otousama and

Nakamaro-oniisama had also received many marriage proposals for me.

A chill ran down my spine.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, nothing.”

I knew my fate in the game was to fall to ruin as the villainess. My house was in decline, and there were foreign influences at work in the background. Did this mean my fall at the protagonist’s hands was partly orchestrated by the government itself?

I wasn’t a villainess of my own volition. It was because *they* pushed me to my ruin, setting up trap after trap for me, and then offering me up as a sacrifice so that everyone else could get the happy ending they wanted in this story.

“Ah, if I don’t have any heirs, then perhaps Nakamaro-oniisama will take over the country in my stead.”

“Yes. And I know you are clever enough to see where that will leave me.”

Asagiri-san was supported by the Iwazaki Group. It was a zaibatsu built on sucking up to the nation, which gave it strong supporters among politicians and businessmen. Asagiri-san was warning me on behalf of this country’s very core.

“You’re worrying about too much at this stage. We’re just children.”

“And yet you’re a *child* who has exerted influence on our government and involved yourself in the American presidential election, essentially detonating a bomb in the midst of a prim gated community. The entire globe is in an uproar over you. You knew, at the end of all of that, you would be expected to form a nation and claim independence from the one you live in.” Asagiri-san’s logical point was made so eloquently that I was lost for words. She had the

nerve and ability to stand up to me, and yet she was saying *I* was too advanced for my age.

She took another piece of apple pie and continued.

"We're just children, you say. I could say the same to you. In the past, we would have been considered adults from the age of a first year in junior high school and been granted exceptional power. There will come a time, Keikain-san, where childhood will no longer work as an excuse. That is when history will crush you without a thought."

A silence passed between us. Driven by a sudden determination, I broke it.

"May I ask about the final reason you called me here? The pointless one?"

"I mean it when I say it is pointless, but here it is. Would you like to be my *friend*, Keikain-san?"

Pointless indeed—at least when compared to the other two reasons.

"You mean friends instead of just relatives?"

"That's right. I feel a little inferior around here, you know."

Asagiri-san's mother came from the Iwazaki Group. The Asagiri March wasn't the same as the other penniless noble houses, and the children from the Iwazaki family were apparently kept separate. It was no wonder she felt out of place.

"I shall do my best to become your friend," I said.

"Likewise. Female friendships are equal parts joining hands and stepping on each other's toes, aren't they?" She offered me her hand. "Call me Kaoru. I shall call you Runa-san."

"Then I shall call you Kaoru-san as well. A genuine pleasure."

We shook hands—but the table was too long for us to step on each other's toes while we did it.

That was the start of my long friendship with Kaoru-san.

Amane Mio had three older sisters. None of them were blood related, but she lovingly referred to them as “oneechan” all the same, even now that we were in elementary school.

“Oh, so it’s like *Little Women*.” Saitou Keiko-san laughed, and as her employer, I felt I had to say something.

“Wait, does that mean I am the eldest sister?”

No one said anything, but I definitely seemed like the oldest. When Keiko-san started speaking about that book, it naturally made me want to read the Japanese translation. So we all received a copy.

And that’s where this story starts.

“If the oldest sister slot’s taken, I’ll be the second oldest!” Asuka-chan declared. She was somewhat pushy for someone who’d hide behind her older sister’s shadow.

There was no scramble between Mio-chan and Hotaru-chan for the youngest spot. And so we were in agreement with one another.

The four of us spent time together one day after school. We took photos in those booths that were popular with girls around our age. We were too young to be let loose at an arcade, so we were accompanied by my maid, Aki-san, and my guards, Tamiya Makoto-san and Michihara Naomi-san.

“Everybody smile!”

I was secretly worried that Hotaru-chan wouldn’t show up in the photo. But, in her own words, she had learned to “control” her power, and so all four of our smiling faces appeared safe and sound.

Naturally, with our pictures taken, our attention was drawn to the other games at the arcade.

“What made you pick this arcade, Runa-chan?”

“Because it’s well suited to beginners.”

“You mean some *aren’t*?” Asuka-chan wondered, and she accused me of being a professional shooter. She must have found out about me playing at the arcade when I went skiing with the boys.

“Let’s play this one! You can get candy and dollies!”

Nobody was insensitive enough to point out that it would be cheaper just to buy those things—except me. I called over Aki-san and whispered into her ear.

“I’m going to hand over a wad of cash and buy the entire machine, so ask them to set it to its easiest mode and—”

“Runa-chan?”

Asuka-chan had made me kneel on the game chair before we even began.

“Gaaargh! Why?! I was so close!”

“Which is why I wanted them to change the settings…”

Asuka-chan was so bad at this genre of game that it bordered on ridiculous. I watched on as she lost one hundred-yen coin after another.

“Time to count on our secret weapon, Hotaru-chan!” Asuka-chan looked around. “Wait, where did she go?”

“Hotaru-oneechan is over there.” Mio-chan pointed at the older girl, a curious look in her eye.

Our lucky charm was busy losing and looking confused at a rock, paper, scissors game. Apparently her luck only worked on other people.

“I was thinking. Can we really be like the characters in *Little Women*?” Asuka-chan asked, enjoying her vanilla ice cream from a nearby stall. Out of all of us, she had gotten most into the novel after beginning to read it.

I gave the driest answer imaginable between bites of my chocolate ice cream. “I’d like to be, though whether we are capable is a different story.”

Hotaru-chan inclined her head, confused, as she munched on her matcha ice cream.

Mio-chan was eating orange ice cream as she listened. “I have a lot of money, but not enough to make *everyone* happy. Does that make me different from the people who don’t do anything to help those who are sad because they can’t help *anyone*?”

“My dad’s a politician, so I think I get it. You just need to make half your district plus one extra person happy. That’s how you win an election!”

“Now *that’s* an interpretation I haven’t heard before, Asuka-chan.”

“A very basic one too! Something you can rely on whenever you get stuck. Now, I gave you some great advice, so gimme a lick of your ice cream!”

“Fine. It would be my pleasure to let you take a bite, ma’am.”

Hotaru-chan started staring at Mio-chan’s ice cream.

“D-do you want some?” Mio-chan asked, noticing.

Hotaru-chan nodded.

Aki-san had taken advantage of her position as our guardian to buy herself a chocolate cookie ice cream. “*Little Women* was set in a different time and a different country. Yet everyone the world over can agree they grew up to be wonderful ladies. That’s why the book is still considered a masterpiece to this day. I hope you four will grow up to be fine ladies too.”

All of us nodded at her heartfelt words.

Mio-chan spoke to her parents about it the next morning.

“Can I be a wonderful lady like the ones in this book?”

“Yes, you can.”

“Of course you can. You’re our daughter!”

Mio-chan didn’t know that we didn’t have the “normal” parents she did. We wanted to find that familial warmth in our sisterhood with Mio-chan; of course, we were never going to tell her that much.

“I’m going to become a wonderful lady!”

“You hit your head or something, Runa?”

“You’re such an idiot, Eiichi-kun!”

I didn’t talk to Eiichi-kun until he apologized three days later. He even added that I was fine lady already, so he didn’t know why I was aiming to become one now…

A NUMBER OF NEWSPAPER EXTRACTS

“The TV show Pro Chefs is making a comeback in the spring schedule reshuffle. It was originally taken off the air after a jump in production costs and Ayukawa Motors’s withdrawal as a sponsor. However, Keika Group’s Teisei Department Stores have now promised to fund the program fully. It is resuming in the late-night Sunday slot.

As part of its sponsorship, Teisei Department Stores will supply the show with certain ingredients which will be available in its stores post-broadcast and the show will contain one simple recipe using those ingredients each episode. The majority of the ingredients will be transported by air from Hokkaido, and the aim is to connect their use in the program with a sales promotion.

The ingredient chosen for the first episode was scallops. Episode one pitted a professional French chef against the head chef at Keika Hotel’s Shinjuku branch. The French chef was the winner. While the food used during filming is usually disposed of, for this episode it was given to Lady Keikain Runa, who was there visiting the

filming. She didn't take part in the judging this time, and when asked for her comment, she refused to say which she preferred."

(This article came with a photograph of Lady Keikain Runa enjoying the food).

"Iwazaki Heavy Industries Ltd. held a launching ceremony for a new ship: the Diamond Actress. Another ship named the Diamond Prima Donna is also being built at the same Iwazaki Heavy Industries Ltd.'s Nagasaki shipyard and has been acquired, along with Imperial Yusen, by Keika Shipping. Keika Shipping is also planning to invest in a Pacific Ocean route operated by Akamatsu Hokkaido Ferry, a subsidiary of the Akamatsu Corporation, with stops at Tomakomai, Oarai, and Tokyo.

She is a large, ultra-high-speed ferry with a gross tonnage of ten-thousand tons. She can travel up to thirty knots, fit three hundred trucks, and carry over one thousand passengers. Her purpose will be to carry fresh produce to the Kanto region, a trade which has increased in recent years.

Lady Keikain Runa was present at the launch ceremony and remarked that she hoped the new ferry would play a part in bettering logistics between Hokkaido and Honshu."

(A photo of Lady Keikain Runa breaking the ceremonial wine bottle against the ship is attached).

"The Yubari International Fantastic Film Festival opened in Yubari, Hokkaido, and proved to be a fantastic festival with the full cooperation of the Keika Group.

The group cooperated with the festival by purchasing Yubari municipal bonds, and the festival featured performances by the Keika Opera Company and Iwasawa Productions. The annual show continues to blow those from previous years out of the water.

Yubari had been suffering from depopulation due in part to the closure of its coal mines, but it has now made the choice to survive as a company town for the Keika Group. The majority of its residents are working for the Moonlight Hokkaido Resort in the city, and while some have criticized the Keika Group for taking advantage of the city's woes, those voices have mostly been drowned out by the film festival, which has pulled tourists to the area.

A guest at the event, Lady Keikain Runa charmed attendees with her stunning voice, which has been the talk of the industry from some time. She commented that she hoped everyone would enjoy themselves."

(A photo of Lady Keikain Runa singing the theme to the movie she is introducing is attached. The comment reads "I learned this song from a game.")

"Not a day goes by when the classical music industry doesn't talk about Lady Keikain Runa. They are calling her a modern-day Sarah Bernhardt. Even at her young age, she is capable of belting out the famous Queen of the Night aria, spreading her name and blooming legacy like wildfire through Japan's classical music scene and even making a name for herself in Europe. She has often performed with the Teia International Philharmonic Orchestra and has polished her beautiful singing voice even further. There is no doubt that she is set to become one of Japan's top sopranos.

There is talk that she ought to study abroad in Europe, the home of classic music, once she has finished her elementary education. However, due to her position as a high-ranking successor of the House of Romanov, there are still rumors flying that she possesses the family's treasure, and so any study abroad in Europe is likely to invite both chaos among high society and political strife. Some say her study abroad is likely to provoke Russia at a time when tensions are already high due to the EU's eastern expansion. Others say that music should have no borders, and that to lock her voice

away would be sacrilegious. The latter opinion is not so widespread…"

(A photo of Lady Keikain Runa in an outfit from *Gismonda* passed to her by the Keika Opera Company when she went to see them perform it).

"The Imperial Game Show has started this spring, with each company showing off its new launches and successes in gaming. Of particular note was a company showcasing a new dance game with a tournament, attracting many fearless contenders and showing off the game's popularity.

A surprise contender, a small girl, made a last-minute entry and blew the crowd away with her dancing and fantastic singing voice. Flustered staff had a dispute with her accompanying secretaries and maids. It was discovered that the girl was Lady Keikain Runa. Her appearance caused quite the stir.

Lady Keikain Runa is a distinguished songstress, known in the classical world as a modern-day Sarah Bernhardt, so it is no surprise that she caused such fervor with her performance. However, her surprise performance apparently later earned her a strong scolding from her maids and her accompanying secretaries."

(A photo of Lady Keikain Runa giving an adorable performance with her dance moves and voice at the tournament is attached).

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GLOSSARY AND NOTES:

The book Mitsuya was reading: *Neko no Chikyugi* (translation: Cat's Earth) by Mizuhito Akiyama. Published by KADOKAWA.

The book Runa was reading: *Rakuen no Majo-tachi* (translation: The Witches of Paradise) by Satomi Kikawa. Published by Shuueisha.

Category 3 Railway Business: The Kobe Rapid Transit Railway is one example. It refers to a business that owns a rail line, but the trains that run on the line belong to a different company.

Shin-Osaka's Extra Platforms: In the story, the Toukai service serves the line until Shin-Osaka, where there are platforms that go on to west Japan. But it wasn't until Runa's plan was already in action that she realized the Toukai platforms probably make more money, considering how often they're used.

The Summery Song on the Radio: *Music Hour* by Porno Graffiti

Director: This job involves supervising several different officer classes within the police and leading important investigations. You see a lot of career bureaucrats getting promoted to this position nowadays. The position became infinitely more famous due to Muroi-san, a character from the drama *Bayside Shakedown*.

American General Contractor: Look up the Cochabamba Water War. "Evil corporations" are not *entirely* evil. They may be greedy, arrogant, and merciless, but everyone is equal in the eyes of money. That is why they have some support in the third world.

Private Military Company: Also abbreviated as PMC. Most people just see them as mercenaries.

Photo Booths: These exploded in popularity between 1999 and 2002.

Claw Machine: It was around this time they added video game merchandise to the available prizes.

Rock, Paper, Scissors Game: Its proper name is apparently *Jankenman*.

Yubari: The city went bankrupt in 2007.

The Song Runa Sang: *The Goonies 'r' Good Enough* by Cyndi Lauper.

Runa's Outfit at the Production: Based on the poster for *Gismonda* by Alphonse Mucha.

Chapter 7:
Tachibana-san's Home

"I HAVE A QUESTION, Grandfather. When was it that you decided Her Ladyship was worth serving?"

Tachibana Ryuuji lived in an apartment close to the Keikain residence. He didn't live in a house, despite his vast income. Truth be told, he didn't deem it necessary as a widower. Now that his wife had passed on, he decided to spend his days as best he could, serving Keikain Runa as the final act of service in his life.

"I picked up on her peculiarities very early on. That was why I was so quick to train you, so that you could serve her as well." Tachibana answered Yuka's question, gazing up wistfully at the ceiling, despite the fact that it all started only a few years ago. After his son and daughter-in-law moved into their own place, Tachibana quit smoking and drinking, living a modest lifestyle all so he could serve Runa as her butler. She was like a granddaughter to him.

"I first noticed something different in my study. She was always going in and out of there, and when she was gone, I would go in to tidy up after her—but there was nothing to tidy. I thought it rather strange." Tachibana smiled in a way he never would in front of Runa. There was a darkness and menace to his smile, much like you would find in the faces of those who handled more dubious types of information.

He was born to a poor farming family in Karafuto during the Manchurian War, and took on any job he could in society's underworld to live alone as soon as he could. That was when he met Keikain Hikomaro, a man who had managed to expand his market share and influence within the medical sector.

Tachibana was employed by Keika Pharmaceuticals, where he proved his skills and became both Hikomaro's guard, and his

informant in the dark underbelly of their country. His knowledge came in handy, and he started to climb the career ladder. As the world became more stable, there was less need for workers like Tachibana at companies like Keika Pharmaceuticals, so he quit and became Hikomaro's butler instead.

The head of the Keikain family he now worked for, Kiyomaro, did not treat him with any contempt. In fact, he introduced Tachibana to his wife, who came from a fallen samurai family. The features of his late wife's face could still be seen in Yuka's today.

"It is not unheard of for a child of two or three to look at books in a study. It *is* unheard of that the study does not require tidying afterward. Books are organized in a bookshelf. What that means is that Her Ladyship was able to *read* at that age." It was thanks to the corner of the world he came from that Tachibana spotted the inconsistency. Once he noticed, catching Runa out was easy. "When I took Her Ladyship tea and snacks, she would try to hide it, speaking only of how pretty the 'pictures' were. However, it was easy to check what she was reading: history books and encyclopedias. It was as though she was hurrying to understand her situation. She claimed she was capable of tidying up for herself, but then she put those books back in their proper positions, and I was sure—she understood exactly what she was reading." An amused smile flickered across Tachibana's face, but Yuka looked like she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Still, she knew Runa's outstanding abilities were the real deal—as was her grandfather's impressive skill in picking up on them.

"Yuka, Her Ladyship knows she does not belong to the main Keikain family. There are times when she considers walking away and starting fresh by herself. You must not let her. There are too many people out there waiting to pounce on her." His voice was gentle, but it also conveyed how terrifying the underbelly of society could

be. He was relieved when his granddaughter nodded without seeming fearful.

There were those within the Keikain family who considered Runa's actions a way to regain honor for her late father's name, or to take revenge against the Keikain family itself. There were also plots to get rid of her—other than the kidnapping attempt—that Tachibana had thwarted behind the scenes, dangers only he was aware of. Then there was her position as a successor to the House of Romanov drawing recent attention, and the new awareness about her important part in the fight over the return of Northern Karafuto.

Runa could announce she was stepping away from everything now, but Tachibana knew from the shadows of history he'd seen that those who had their eyes on her—that the very times she lived in—wouldn't allow it.

Tachibana also accepted there were some things he didn't know—such as Japan, America, Russia, and other countries combining their intelligence agencies to plot against Runa to the extent that her leaving the family would be suicidal.

"There can be no doubt about the rarity of Her Ladyship's abilities. However, she is still a child and therefore hasn't a single heir. You are the only one who can protect her with your own life, Yuka." Her grandfather's words were gentle yet stern all at once.

He, Ichijou, and Toudou were the only real pawns Runa had in her possession. She was buying too many companies and expanding her businesses too fast, and they were losing control.

Runa never cared much for her companies beyond whether they could make a profit, but on the flipside that meant she barely had a say over anything else—not least because she didn't send in nearly enough pawns.

That was why pinching Keikain Nakamaro from the main family as an outside director was such a good idea. It meant the staff

assigned under him, who would be mainstays for the family's next generation, could have direct participation in business operations. Whether a house or a company, the type of people who sought to establish it was different from the type who sought to maintain it. Ability mattered more than status when it came to establishment, but maintenance required both status and loyalty.

The main Keikain family considered Tachibana useful, while the branch families and their retainers shunned him. That was how he ended up with Runa.

"Ichijou and I will continue to take care of things businesswise, and the things that Her Ladyship cannot do as a child. I want you to serve by her side, Yuka, and protect her. That is how we pay back the Keikain family for allowing me and my son to live as we have."

Tachibana's wife had blessed him with one boy and one girl before her departure. Their son worked as a technician at one of the Keika Group's central businesses: Keika Chemicals. There he married a woman who worked in admin and was able to live the average life of a Japanese worker. Yuka was the second daughter of Tachibana's son.

His daughter had also worked at Keika Pharmaceuticals in an admin role, but she resigned after marrying the husband she met while working there, and now she was living in a happy household with two children.

"Very well, Grandfather. I will protect Her Ladyship from nearby, but who will protect her further afield if your grip is slipping as you say it is?"

Tachibana's face lit up with a smile at his granddaughter's question. She was the most talented of his grandchildren; enrolling her in a school for hopeful maids and servants of nobles and zaibatsu families was the right choice.

“She will be here soon. I called you here so I could introduce you.”

The doorbell chimed and Tachibana went to open it.

Yuka’s first impression of the woman was that she resembled an office lady on Wall Street more than one from Japan.

“Ah, I’ve had an offer from Wall Street to work in an investment bank as a fund manager over there.”

“And yet you are here now, due to my selfish request. I can promise you a higher wage working as Her Ladyship’s secretary than you would earn out there. Her Ladyship knows how to value those with talent, as you well know.”

“Miss Sullivan. This is my granddaughter, Yuka. Yuka, this is Miss Angela Sullivan.”

The reason Tachibana could call these the best days of his life was because he never fulfilled Keikain Hikomaro’s final request. It was Tachibana who had pushed him to suicide over the scandal with the east and resulting cover-up, and it was only because he was working as Runa’s butler, instead of taking her in as his own, that he was enjoying such a peaceful life now.

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GLOSSARY AND NOTES

Investment Bank Fund Manager: In other words, she would be in charge of vulture investing.

Chapter 8:
Cassandra's Struggle

AN INDESCRIBABLE TENSION sparked through the air of the Choufuu Council, the Keika Group's committee of managing directors. Just when their mid-sized companies had experienced rapid growth and their positions in the company rankings had settled, suddenly the Iwazaki Group had come along to swallow them up by buying them.

It was only natural that this perturbed the directors.

The companies which I had bought requested my presence at the council, while those with older roots in the Keika Group wished for Nakamaro-oniisama. There was also one other highly requested person.

"A pleasure to meet you, Runa-kun. I am here to observe today."

It was the president of the Imperial Iwazaki Bank: Iwazaki Yashirou, one of the three Dons of the Iwazaki Group.

"I would like to get this meeting of the Choufuu Council started. Allow me to begin by introducing our new friends."

Kiyomaro-otousama of Keika Pharmaceuticals was here to help the meeting progress as its chair. At his words, the directors in the seats furthest from his gave their greetings. First was Tachibana Ryuuji, managing director of my established Keika Railway. Next was the head of Echigo Engineering Co. and Keika Parts Manufacturing. And last was the head of Shiyo Electric Co., which had asked for my support with the company's ongoing reshuffle. He was here as an observer.

After their introductions came a round of applause, then it was time for the next topic on the agenda, and the main topic for today's meeting.

“As I’m sure you are all aware, the original companies of the Keika Group are set for unification with the Iwazaki Group. I would therefore like to discuss the future of this council and its hierarchy.”

The members’ tense gazes turned to me. This was essentially a discussion of how to deal with *my* companies going forward. Or, to be more specific, what to do with my particular talents. As stockholders of the Iwazaki Zaibatsu, the rest of the Keikain family had stepped back from their businesses. Meanwhile, I had done the opposite, working even harder to expand mine into what they were today.

“We would like this council to continue. Additionally, we feel we need a little more time to get to know each other,” Ichijou, CEO of Keika Holdings and representative of my conglomerate, spoke up. I kept indirect control over my companies by using Ichijou to keep Keika Holdings in check.

It was obvious that the Iwazaki Group was after Keika Holdings. Keika Holdings was the central pillar of my companies now; I had no intention of letting it go.

“If we are to take your opinion into consideration, Ichijou-shi, then a change in the council’s hierarchy is inevitable. In that event, Keika Holdings, Keika Hotels, and the Akamatsu Corporation are likely to be our top three companies.” Nakamaro-oniisama spoke not as an outsider director of Keika Holdings, but as the successor to the Keikain family.

Tachibana raised his hand next. He had probably already discussed these matters with Ichijou and Nakamaro-oniisama. “We were wondering whether you, Nakamaro-sama, would be interested in taking on the role of outside director for Keika Hotels and the Akamatsu Corporation as well. Additionally, we see no problem with allowing Keika Pharmaceuticals—or, as it will become, Keika-Iwazaki Pharma—to lead the council as it has before.”

Under that plan, the hierarchy would be ordered thus: Keika-Iwazaki Pharma, Keika Holdings, and then the Akamatsu Corporation. Nakamaro-oniisama had been considering which one should be his main company after his father's retirement for a while now, which had the potential to change the outcome of this discussion at a later time.

"Are you happy with me remaining a representative of Keika-Iwazaki Pharma?"

Even after the merger, Keika-Iwazaki Pharma was still a small fry compared to the other major pharmaceutical companies. It also didn't look great when compared to Keika Holdings, which had joined the other major banks, nor the Akamatsu Corporation, which was one of the big five corporations out there as it held both the acclaimed Teisei Department Stores, which had become an industry giant despite the reshuffle, and Sougou Department Stores.

Ichijou's next words showed he kept those facts in mind. "It is up to you. We can also offer you a position wherever you like as an outside director."

We had hired Nakamaro-oniisama as an outside director to show the main Keikain family that we were happy for them to monitor us, and that we didn't want to cut them out completely.

"Although I am here as an observer, may I make a comment?"

Everyone in the room seemed to hold their breath at once. Kiyomaro-otousama nodded, and President Iwazaki, of the Iwazaki Bank, continued.

"I am here as the head of the former Keika Zaibatsu's main bank. As you are now becoming a part of the Iwazaki Group, I would like to make it clear that the bank has no intention of abandoning you." He paused, and then looked right at me. "What do you think, Runa-kun? How would you like to gather up all your companies to come and join us?"

A chill ran down my spine. I knew that this was the sole reason he'd showed up today.

"I'm afraid I must refuse for the time being. There is still much I have left to do." It took me a little while to gather up the courage to give my refusal, long enough that a sheen of sweat had spread across my forehead. It was a relief when President Iwazaki didn't bring the topic up again that day.

"Runa, would you mind sharing what those things you 'have left to do' are?"

The Choufuu Council meeting was over. I was expecting Nakamaro-oniisama to ask something like that on the way home, and I had a response prepared.

"I made a promise to Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa and former Prime Minister Fuchigami that I would finish dealing with this country's bad debts."

"Do you not trust us adults, Runa?"

I smiled, trying very hard not to voice the immediate "no" that was on my tongue. I couldn't explain to him that I had seen the devastating future that lay ahead if I left things to everyone's best efforts.

"My lady." Tachibana caught my attention from the passenger's seat and switched on the TV.

The final stage of the fierce battle that was the American presidential election was Florida—and its map was now painted red. Even though Nakamaro-oniisama was with me, I let out a huge sigh of relief, essentially admitting my involvement in the election. I didn't have time to worry about that just then.

"The Hayashi Regime is struggling to improve its approval ratings.

The cabinet was formed due to former Secretary-General Fuchigami's efforts to prevent the opposition succeeding with its plan to nominate former Secretary-General Katou for the premiership nomination in the special Diet session. That alone has kept approval ratings low, but multiple scandals surrounded the Chief Cabinet Secretary related to his mistress and dinners with members of far-right groups and eventually led to his resignation, which has now pushed those numbers into even more dire waters.

Judging him unfit to fight in next year's House of Councilors election, anti-mainstream factions, including former Secretary-General Katou's, are scheming for the party leader's removal. Even some of those in the main faction, such as Secretary-General Nonaka and Secretary-General in the House of Councilors Akagi, agree with those views, making this a highly unpredictable situation even within the party.

As for the opposition, even this isn't enough to get them to fight the current administration. Representative Oosawa of Japan's Liberal Alliance, who formed a coalition with the ruling party, has now canceled it to become the opposition once more, causing a split within the party with the faction that preferred to stay in the coalition. It seems the opposition is at loose ends, suddenly finding itself without power again…"

I only half paid attention to the news as I sipped on my beloved grape juice. I switched from political to economic news, where the top story was about Keika Holdings.

"It has been announced that Meguro-based mutual insurance company Kadano Life Insurance and Chuo Tokyo-based Kawai Life Insurance are to merge with Far Eastern Life Insurance, a subsidiary of Keika Holdings.

After demutualizing, Far Eastern Life Insurance will change its name to Keika Life Insurance, and a drastic organizational reshuffle will be unavoidable.

In essence, this is a bailout by Keika Holdings. CEO Ichijou-shi said that both of the new companies are to abide by the Keika Rules as part of the deal. Keika Holdings also bailed out Osaka Chuo Ward's Kyomei Bank this spring, and afterward announced a management unification between Keika Maritime Insurance and The Marumaru Mutual Fire and Marine Insurance Company, located in Chiyoda, which has been plagued by rumors of rocky management.

These mergers have strengthened the Group's business foundations in several areas: in retail across Kansai and Tokyo for Keika Bank, in damage insurance for Keikain Maritime Insurance, and in general insurance for Keika Life Insurance.

In light of these mergers, Keika Holdings is considering selling shares in its Teisei Department Stores Group. This relisting would be good news for Japan's economy.

On the other hand, there are certain dietmen, including those within the opposition, who hold the view that Keika Holdings, which has rejected public funding, should be injected with public funds regardless and renationalized…"

I took the remote and switched off the news.

I knew the Keika Group must have looked like it was trying to gather all the spoils for itself post-bubble, and it was being heavily criticized for it. And yet The Marumaru Mutual Fire and Marine Insurance Company, Kadono Life Insurance, and Kawai Life Insurance had been otherwise destined for bankruptcy. The bailout merger was possible because those companies' current stock prices sat at around twenty-two thousand yen each, and they had low unrealized losses as well. This too was a result of my coordination with Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, who kindly exercised his authority as Minister of Finance, something the opposition weren't too happy with. A

minister's achievements were seen as their party's achievements, meaning the opposition had less of a reason to exist.

"Where do I stop…?" I murmured to myself as I lay back on the couch.

I was pretty much done tidying up the financial institutions that were in the worst spots. I had banks, brokerage firms, insurance firms—many of Japan's superior financial institutions. All I needed to do was sell them off, and I would cross the mountain that was Japan's bad debt situation. The government, however, didn't look like it wanted to give me the chance to do so.

"May I have a moment, my lady?"

I got up from the couch, read the report Tachibana handed me, and fell back onto the couch with a hand to my head.

"A weekly magazine has picked up on the profits from a foundation of mid-to-small companies being passed on to several politicians of the ruling party, and the mass media is in an uproar. The names include Vice President Murashita, former Prime Minister Fuchigami, and several ministers…"

"We likely won't be able to do anything so conspicuous anymore."

The TV showed the vice president being hounded for an explanation by a group of reporters. His words were so muddled that it was obvious he wouldn't survive this. Several dietmen of his faction had already resigned and been arrested, so his own resignation was unavoidable at this point. Former Prime Minister Fuchigami only just qualified for investigation, but since he'd resigned before the earlier election, he was spared. Incidentally, his daughter had run in his district and was successfully elected.

"I must agree. First the Chief Cabinet Secretary's resignation and now this. There will be a reshuffle at the end of the year, and

honestly, I may lose my post." Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa sighed on the other end of the phone. A reshuffle was one way of fixing dissatisfaction within the party by inserting "back-up ministers" into the cabinet to better its reputation among the factions. The Minister of Finance was an important post, and there were lots of people who craved it.

"I was hoping to deal with those general contractors and the Taiei first."

"There are many out there who see what you, a grade-schooler, can do, and decide they can too—that's proof you have allies in your endeavors. People only see what they want to." There was a hint of bitterness in Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's voice.

Next year, government ministries and offices were set to undergo a reorganization, and the current Ministry of Finance would split into a *new* Ministry of Finance and the Financial Services Agency. Not only did this mean that financial governance would move under the FSA, but the hierarchies of the bureaucrats of the former Ministry of Finance would crumble. In other words, if I continued my grandstanding, the new FSA could not miss it.

This was why I decided that Keika Holdings would sell its shares in the Teisei Department Stores Group, and it would use its new capital from the relisting to pay back its special loan to the Bank of Japan. Keika Holdings was a strong major bank with few bad debts, but it had taken out a large loan from the Bank of Japan to help keep its management stable. That the loan was unsecured made it imperative to repay. The opposition party was proclaiming that the loan was problematic and that it would take back Keika Holdings, bought by the Keika Group for a mere eight hundred billion yen:

"If it had been sold to foreign investors, Keika Bank could have gone for 1.5 trillion yen. To sell Keika Bank for close to half that price is preposterous! It needs to be nationalized and sold to foreign investors, its companies released from their zaibatsu."

It was very convenient of them to forget I was the only one prepared to do something at the height of this country's economic troubles. I was more weary than angry at their words. Their plan was to inject Keika Holdings with public funding and issue convertible bonds. A special loan was exactly that—a loan—so all I needed to do was pay it back. A convertible bond was convertible because it could be changed into common stock if certain conditions were fulfilled. The possibility of Keika Holdings becoming renationalized was heightened by the issue fee that would be required by the convertible bond method, but it could all be avoided if the special loan were repaid. Hence why I had rejected the high-handed injection of capital.

"While I may be removed from my post, I will defend Yanagitani-kun's seat as the FSA's Director-General to the very last. All that's left is the Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism, yes?"

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism would come into being during the reshuffle next year, and it would be a huge office with the power to grant approval for public works projects.

The pressure on Keika Holdings was ramping up, so I had come up with a second plan to give indirect support to the general contractors I'd bailed out: giving them work. As part of the Keika Railway, I was planning to take advantage of the soccer world cup to buy Buzen Transport and create a connection with Oita Airport. It was for the sake of the Yufuin Hot Springs I was developing, which, as an area putting effort into its touristic trains, I hoped would become a prime tourist location within Kyushu.

"That's right. I've been thinking of focusing more on my railway company."

"Are you aiming for a Shinkansen extension to Shinjuku?"

An extension to Shinjuku for the Tohoku and Joetsu Shinkansen lines: the required land was already secured, but the massive construction costs meant the project was currently in stasis. Once it was built, though, it was sure to make *incredible* amounts of money.

"Yes. I've worked hard for this country. I thought I'd do something for myself for a change."

"That's not something a grade-schooler should be saying. You certainly know how to make a man feel inadequate."

My original plan had been to work through Taiei's three trillion yen interest-bearing debt, the biggest in the logistics business, and launch headfirst into dealing with the bad debts among general contractors and real estate. Unfortunately, the government was blocking off those paths; the timing was too soon after the two recent scandals.

"Perish the thought. I'm incredibly grateful for everything you've done for me, Izumikawa-sensei."

"You still have a long life ahead of you. I pray you'll encounter another politician you can say the same thing to."

The cabinet reshuffle went ahead in December. Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa retained his deputy premiership but was removed as Minister of Finance. I encountered him several times there on out because of my friendship with Yuujirou-kun, and when we met, we would often reminisce about the year we spent working together.

The United States' presidential inauguration took place in January.

America was—of course—in the northern hemisphere; Washington, D.C. was more or less on the same latitude as Sendai. The point is that the nation's capital was cold.

“Are you ready, my lady?”

Tachibana had prepared a fluffy coat for me. There were even hand warmers taped to the inside, making it the perfect defense against the bitterly chilly weather. I glanced up at the sky above the city. Snow was falling from above sheets of gray.

“Pardon me. I have information about the defense situation in the area.”

Just like in the history I knew, the Florida vote had been contested until the very end, before the Democratic candidate finally announced his defeat. The Democratic voters were not happy with this result and many of them had gathered to protest around Washington, D.C. The Secret Service passed that information on to my escorts—given that I was seen as a major activist for the Republican party in Florida.

More specifically, when the troubles in Florida became news, the American media immediately noticed me and ran a story that Japan had meddled in the US election. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied doing so, escalating it into a diplomatic issue.

When the story blew up, a lot of people who saw it doubted that I was Japanese at all, since I was only a quarter Japanese. If they looked into my background and found out it was a mess of Romanov blood and Japanese dukedoms, I would be treated as a celebrity rather than with suspicion.

“Oh. Not her…”

“Are you kidding? The audience is gonna eat it up!”

That was more or less how the American media spoke about me. That was why I had my own guards, paid for out of pocket, as well as the Secret Service protecting me. The paparazzi were waiting for me before I even landed at the airport…

“Your visitor is here, my lady.”

“Thank you. Let him through.”

Tachibana opened the door, and I found myself shaking hands with the former hero. He had retired after the previous war, and then did several jobs as a temporary agent until I finally won him over.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, my lady. Although I’m not quite sure what an ancient soldier like me can do at this point.”

“There is no need to be so modest, sir. You are the famed Desert Hero. At the very least, I am confident you will be able to help me solve my problem.”

A true hero, the man before me didn’t treat children as inferior. He was also the commander in chief of a multinational force, and he was appraising me the same way he would the Iraqi military. Honestly, though, it was easier when they underestimated me.

“The homeless veteran problem—I wanted to hear your proposed solution.”

“Finding them jobs isn’t the hard part. The hard part is finding them jobs they’re *capable* of.”

“Which brings us to your gated community idea. Feels like something out of a bad sci-fi movie.”

The homeless veteran problem was a quiet, long-term problem in America. It had started after the Vietnam War and persisted with the Gulf War, and the American government had yet to find an effective solution. My proposal was a gated community—or, rather, a fortified city.

The plan was to dig out a dry moat around the land I’d purchased, pile up earth at a steep angle, and set a concrete wall topped with barbed wire on top of that. The moat and embankment could be used to quickly drain the town in case of flooding, and they also prevented water getting in. Dotting trees around the place

would prevent sniping and improve the town's environment and views.

All the roads in the gated community counted as private land, so if any African-Americans or Hispanics tried to enter, I could have them arrested for trespassing, or for trying to enter without a resident permit.

I would collect money to pay for the security via a monthly "toll" from the residents. Later on, I would sell some of the land, get rich, and have my own house built there.

This was a residential area where access was monitored via gate; institutions such as schools and hospitals were essential, so I would buy an educational institution and a medical corporation. Water and electricity were also necessary, so I would secure shares in those companies as well. I couldn't leave them without any nearby stores either, so I purchased a retail firm, which *had* to have a community-based system where residents could order ingredients via a single phone call. It wouldn't do to make rich people shop for themselves.

Security was necessary to protect the town from destitute criminals, ne'er-do-wells, and heathens. I would hire the staff from the private military company to take care of it. All of these services were wrapped up in a single city conglomerate, where each employee would encourage others to support the presidential election and help the town's autonomy be recognized.

This was the Moonlight Florida Resort, which I bought with my earnings from the very height of the IT bubble. Once the election was over, I tried to get rid of it—and, much to my amusement, I had buyers making offers left and right. It was a self-governing body created by and for rich people. It was a major hit in Florida, where successful people came to retire anyway.

America was a multiethnic mosaic. It wasn't like Japan, where your neighbor was highly likely to be Japanese. Your neighbor could be African-American, Hispanic, Muslim, Catholic, Asian, or anything else. Although they were all considered American under the same flag and country, it was difficult for a genuine sense of brotherhood to take root. And there were many very rich white people who didn't like their taxes being spent on other groups.

They could live a comfortable life inside these walls, enjoying high quality healthcare, perfect water and sewer services, and highly trained maids. It was also necessary to have a special defense force, loyal to the community, to prevent outsiders from coming in. This community's guards were my starting point for expanding my PMC within America, and I wanted to expand to other resort areas too, which was when I caught a glimpse of this country's darkness.

"You realize that if this plan goes ahead, then yes, the number of towns and cities like this will increase, and in turn so will the slums—rapidly."

"That's the government's problem—the same government that hasn't done anything about homeless veterans. It will take an enormous amount of time and money for them to return to society. If you want to help them out more quickly, making them soldiers is the best way to do it." I glanced out the window. It was still snowing. "I know all about 'peace with slavery.' But with this plan, there won't be as many veterans out sleeping in the snow."

"It's the best we can do, but it's not the ideal solution, hm? What's important to me is that some of these veterans are saved. But I am a man who has pledged his allegiance to the stars and stripes. I may be retired, but my loyalty holds firm."

Even knowing it would help, he was hesitant to join a PMC belonging to another nation. I wasn't prepared to get in a fight with the USA over this, so I made myself perfectly clear.

“If, at any point, you feel my actions are working against the interests of the United States, you may act however you wish in your capacity as a member of the US army.”

He didn’t respond, so I broke the silence. “I would be grateful if you could give me some warning beforehand, of course.”

He seemed to make up his mind, and he fixed his eyes firmly on mine. “All right. I’ll be your CEO.”

That was the moment my PMC, big enough for me to exert my influence within the United States, was formed. This idea was something I wanted to bring to Japan too—we currently had twenty million former citizens of Northern Japan who had been dealt an economic blow by the bubble’s bursting. Germany had the same problem, where people who lost access to housing were pushed toward neo-Nazism. It was set to become a political issue in Japan as well. My solution would work toward helping these people, though the class and geographical divides might be too much to fix things completely.

“My lady, you have a visitor.”

Strange. The only visitor I was expecting today was the desert hero. But once I heard the visitor’s name from Tachibana, I knew my only course of action was to see them. A moment later, they arrived, accompanied by members of the special police.

“It is good to see you again. The last time we saw each other was at the retirement party, wasn’t it?”

“I’m just another citizen these days. Congratulations on your appointment as Secretary of State.”

One was the man in charge of the American army, the (apparently former) Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The other was a commanding officer below him who’d led a multinational force to victory during the Gulf War. They exchanged a firm handshake.

The Secretary of State had traveled here incognito, apparently choosing me as his first order of business in his new role.

"The president is highly grateful for your generous service, my lady. However, I hope you understand that our country would like to avoid trouble with the far east right now."

It was no wonder he was concerned, with my massive PMC and the northern Karafuto problem. If he wanted to talk diplomacy, then so would I.

"Oh, would you like me to pass that on to the Japanese government?"

"No, I'm just here to see an old friend. I thought I'd mention it, that's all."

"Seeing you here, I'm glad I retired. This atmosphere doesn't suit me."

The desert hero would probably tell the American government about my PMC and my true purpose for it: the plan to help out the veterans. The problem was, even if I said I wasn't planning to make use of those soldiers, no one would *truly* believe me.

"Excuse me, my lady. The carrying of flammable objects is prohibited."

Ah, so I wasn't allowed these hand warmers under my coat, even though they were so good at keeping out the cold… *Achoo!*

2001 was the year government ministries and offices were rearranged. As the Ministry of Finance was also affected, Mitsuya-kun's dad was sent somewhere else. The question of where was answered in a small newspaper column.

The collected upper echelons of the Ministry of Finance had been kicked out due to the scandal, but Mitsuya-kun's dad had been

shielded, and he was now Director of Policy of the Ministry of Finance's Minister's Secretariat. He was steadily moving up in the world.

Meanwhile, the Financial Services Agency was trying to justify its existence by working hard governing finance, specifically by trying to hasten the tidying up of the country's bad debts. Unlike the announcement of one massive merger of financial institutions that shook the economic sphere last year, this year they were conducting mergers one after the other, making it appear that the problem was being solved in one fell swoop.

It was the end of the line for Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa and myself, who had been working hard behind the scenes to solve the problem. Now all these companies were facing a hard landing.

"It all certainly sounds very convincing, doesn't it?"

Eiichi-kun looked up from his homework. "Oh, did you say something, Runa?"

"No." I put the monthly publication back on the library shelf. I knew they weren't aimed at grade-schoolers, but I found that particular column valuable, despite its bias. That photographer also took some gravure photos. It was the way it aggregated information that set this magazine apart. Once you knew how to recognize the difference in quality in things like that, your worldview opened up. That was also why anonymous online message boards had annihilated old media.

"Support for the Indian Earthquake. Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's Leadership Skills on Full Display."

The newspaper praised Japan's immediate dispatch of personnel to support western India after its recent earthquake. The position of deputy prime minister wasn't much more than a figurehead, but

Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa had urged action in this case, securing his place as one with responsibility over crisis management. I heard the move also had support from the lieutenant governor working under Governor Iwasawa.

The Japan of this world was more of a “normal country” than the one I knew, and it was good to see there was no pushback against its work overseas, including the expansion of the Japan Self-Defense Forces. That also made it a major player on the world stage.

The Indian earthquake was a good pretext to offer support via the Akamatsu Corporation and an opportunity to appoint local staff for the purposes of intelligence gathering. The earthquake had occurred near the border with Pakistan, and right above that was Afghanistan, a country set to cause trouble in the history books in the near future.

Spreading out a map of the world and turning it upside down revealed a lot. Things were still tense in Far East Asia: there were the tensions between Russia and Japan surrounding the return of northern Karafuto and the near-constant dispute between Manchuria and Russia over their borders. The border confrontation between Manchuria and Communist China was still unresolved, and China had made a move against Vietnam, only to follow in America’s footsteps and taste defeat.

India and Pakistan were fighting a religious conflict over the Kashmir region, and in the Middle East, the fuel for the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the Arab-Israeli Wars had not burned out, much like oil. Most people in this world seemed to agree that World War III would begin with Asia.

“*The chaos within the Fellowship of Constitutional Government continues. Following the corruption scandal involving the Foundation for the Development of Small- to Medium-Sized Companies, Vice*

President Murashita has resigned and been arrested. The approval ratings for the Hayashi Administration have fallen decisively, and many fear that, at this rate, the party will be in a weak position for the summer's House of Councilors election…"

It was ironic that Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, having given up his real power and becoming free, was now even more influential than before. But Prime Minister Hayashi wasn't likely to last in his post much longer, and Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa could not succeed him.

Although he was the prime minister for the caretaker government, he couldn't win against the former Fuchigami faction and the Hayashi faction's numbers. There was a vicious power struggle going on in the party right now over who would become the next leader and prime minister.

"No to Vested Interests! Dissolve the Zaibatsu! Bring on the Heisei Restoration!"

That was the gist of the argument from the newspaper in my hands. I knew these arguments would eventually bring about the arrival of a certain silver-haired politician capable of maintaining long-term power for the ruling party. Having said that, this Japan's political sphere was marginally different from the one I knew, and I didn't know for how long the two would continue to run alongside each other so closely. I mean, it was 2001—I knew what was going to happen.

But I also knew I wasn't going to successfully convince anyone of that.

"I guess there's nothing I can do…"

"Did you say something, Runa?"

"No, nothing at all."

I'd only murmured the words; Eiichi-kun must have had pretty good hearing. I didn't know if he was worried about me or just bored and trying to start a conversation.

"Why aren't Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun here?"

"Yuujirou's got a rally in his electoral district. Mitsuya's got stuff with his committee and was gonna be too late to make it worth coming." Eiichi-kun snapped his notebook shut, signaling the completion of his homework. I was finished already, so I started packing up my things.

"Say, how do you think you could convince people to believe Cassandra's prophecy?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's a thought experiment. I've been reading the *Iliad*."

"Oh, the one with the Trojan War?"

Of course Eiichi-kun recognized what I was talking about immediately. That was the power of a main character for you.

Cassandra was a Trojan princess given the gift of prophecy by the gods, but at the same time cursed so that no one would believe her. While she warned people about the fall of Troy, no one listened, and so it came to pass anyway.

Eiichi-kun and I left the library together. He didn't answer my question until we were putting our indoor shoes away in our shoe lockers.

"Her problem was that she was a prophet and nothing else. It would've been better if she had some way to *stop* Troy falling, instead of just being able to see that it would," Eiichi-kun told me.

A prophet without arms is nothing. *"All unarmed prophets have been destroyed,"* as Machiavelli wrote in *The Prince*, if memory served.

“Like you,” Eiichi-kun added.

My heart sprang so violently for one second that the sound consumed my ability to hear.

“I dunno what it is you see, but it’s obvious you’ve chosen to do something about it instead of just sitting back and watching. Now that you’ve started, it’s too late to stop.”

After that, I went to my room. Everything that happened until I calmed down was a blur.

Girls were buying up cooking chocolate in preparation for the fierce battle that was Valentine’s Day. As usual, I handed out cheap chocolates to everybody, but that didn’t mean I was a hermit who let every fad pass her by. I headed over to Teisei Department Stores to buy my own chocolate.

It was then that I noticed a certain noise.

“Is something the matter, my lady?”

“I thought I heard a violin…” I inclined my head, listening for the source of the sound.

Before I pinpointed it, the representative with us from Teisei’s out-of-stores sales department answered my silent question with a smile. “It sounds to me as though somebody is playing outside the storefront. As our stores have invested a lot in the arts, buskers often come to perform by them.”

String instruments were rare when it came to street music, but I knew there were a number of students from music schools who liked to busk to improve their confidence or earn money.

The music put me in a trance, luring me to the store entrance. There I found an older man playing a worn-out violin. Customers walked past him without even a glance. That man’s eyes caught mine, and we smiled at one another. The song he played was

currently popular; copper and silver coins were dotted around the inside of his violin case. When he was finished, I clapped, and he bowed elegantly, just for me.

"That was a marvelous performance. Are you affiliated with anyone?"

"I was, a long time ago. I abandoned my dreams to work a 'real' job, but I just couldn't give this up completely. When I reached mandatory retirement, I had the chance to start playing again. I'm so glad my music touched someone like you, young lady."

He didn't seem to recognize me. He probably knew I was from a well-to-do family because of Tachibana and the sales representative, but he didn't get as far as the Valentine's sale posters next to him, which featured my photo. I wasn't about to point it out to him.

"Since you're here, young lady, have you got any requests? I think I can play most things."

It took guts to perform in public, so close to your audience. I knew how fun and wonderful music could be from my previous life. It was something I gave up on, something I never found my way back to.

"How about this?" With one finger still on my cheek in thought, I called over the sales representative and asked him to buy me a CD from the music store.

This man's magnificent music had touched my heart, and I wanted to do the same for him through song. It was only polite.

The sales representative returned shortly with a CD and a CD player. The man listened to it through headphones and picked up on my intent.

"Music in exchange for music. I can tell you are a sophisticated young lady."

“I wanted to perform this piece, taught to me by my teacher. May I?” I fluttered my eyelashes at the man, who responded with a stiff smile, though his eyes glittered with amusement.

“Music doesn’t require permission from others to make.”

Music was wonderful in the way it could reach the deepest parts of your soul, even if you didn’t understand it. That was something my teacher from my previous life taught me.

I began to sing, and the customers on their way into the store stopped. My teacher had also told me this:

“Always sing loudly—and enjoy it. Otherwise, your soul will remain unmoved by the music. You can worry about the precise sounds you’re making later.”

The girls taking advantage of the Valentine’s sale looked toward the store entrance, their curiosity piqued. Mine was the high-spec body of a villainess: it allowed me to easily reach the peaks I was never able to climb before. There was an element of guilt, but I also knew, finally, that this was what my teacher wanted me to experience. This experience was blocked off to me in my previous life.

Inspired by my voice, the man’s violin skills were restored to their former glory. The song only lasted five minutes, but it was enough for me to catch the attention of everybody around us. The applause when we were finished was like nothing else. The maids escorting me surrounded me then, pulling me immediately to a safe place.

“Thank you for waiting until I was done,” I said.

I knew I was due for a heavy punishment since my actions put me at risk of being hurt (even though I wasn’t), but still…they had let me finish my song. I would need to find a way to thank them later.

I glanced at the head of those maids, a woman in a suit, but she opened her mouth before I could say anything else.

“I won’t tell you to stop singing, my lady, but please remember to choose the appropriate time and place.”

“I understand. But Angela-san, what are you doing here?”

It was only later that Tachibana informed me Angela had resigned from the CIA after the new president took office. He’d hired her to guard me under the guise of being his private secretary. I couldn’t object because technically, she was *his* secretary.

My little duet *may* have caused a bit of a stir—enough for Teisei Department Stores to start putting effort into cultivating street musicians, including opening a concert hall with the hopes of nurturing future stars and attracting customers.

Tachibana got the man’s name, and when I asked the Teia International Philharmonic Orchestra about him, I was surprised to find a violinist there who knew him. Apparently, when he was young, his talents earned him fame, but his family’s financial situation meant he had to leave the music industry. When I mentioned I played a duet with him, all the musicians looked jealous—a fact I would not be passing on to the older man.

We took the opportunity to rehire the man. I heard that, even long after, he would play outside the store on his days off, along with the other people who enjoyed making music there.

2001 was a historical turning point, one that turned the fates of countless people upside down. In his capacity as Minister of Disaster Management, Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa single-handedly led the response to the collision in the Pacific Ocean between a US submarine and a Japanese training ship. On the flip side, this showed that the Hayashi cabinet had fallen into a dysfunctional state and lacked leadership. This was, of course, due to the scandal with the Foundation for the Development of Small- to Medium-Sized Companies. A number of cabinet ministers, starting with Vice

President Murashita—who was also arrested—had been forced to resign. The cabinet's approval rating was in a steep nosedive.

It sent violent shockwaves through the economy too. The charismatic leader of the Taiei, formerly the biggest supermarket chain out there, had resigned, and the group was moving toward dissolution. Teisei Department Stores was originally in the running to buy the group's most expensive division: its convenience stores. Now, it had withdrawn its offer. That made our second defeat in a row after our attempt to bail out a bankrupt Sachii.

"There's something getting in the way of all this…"

Angela was with me in her capacity as a secretary. Her words rang painfully true. I forced a smile, feigning a lack of concern. It was all I could do. After all, we were dealing with the Fair Trade Commission, the watchmen of the Antimonopoly Act: one of the zaibatsu's oldest—and fiercest—enemies. The Antimonopoly Act was a law brought in by the allied nations' political intervention after the war. Since the zaibatsu weren't dissolved in this world's Japan, it was inevitable that the law would become a bugbear for them.

The Commission did what it could to weaken the zaibatsu as time went on, making an enemy of those groups linked to the government, which was why it was an organization that was highly influenced by foreign-owned firms in favor of deregulation, and those linked with the opposition party. It had taken advantage of the burst bubble and the IT revolution to attempt to dissolve the zaibatsu and create a healthier economy, and it had half succeeded.

Regional and smaller zaibatsu had buckled one by one, and even larger zaibatsu had suffered, with their main financial institutions sinking into bad debts, though some of their firms made use of the IT bubble to go independent and create economically sound start-ups.

Keika Group, a dominating zaibatsu with political ties, was an exception. It was desperately continuing its economic activities as

best it could. No, not the Keika Group: the companies *I* was still in charge of, since the majority of the zaibatsu was now a part of the Iwazaki Group. Though they commended my achievements, it seemed they also wanted to put a stop to any further activity on my part. That was why my previous two attempted buyouts had failed; bailing out Sachii and the Taiei's convenience store division would mean the birth of a huge retail giant, even bigger than the Taiei.

"Angela. The American government is, in general, in favor of Japan's deregulation, isn't it?"

"Yes. Although I don't think the current regime has the guts to stand up to you."

As a Democrat, Angela had no problem casually disparaging the Republican government. So it was baffling that America was the very land where citizens pledged their allegiance to their country. The regime change meant there was currently a massive reshuffle of personnel going on in the American government, so it was functioning more poorly than usual.

"Well, never mind. I'm planning on taking things easy for a while, so you can let your former friends know."

Angela narrowed her eyes. There was no doubt that she was still in contact with the CIA—might as well use that to my advantage.

"What friends might you be talking about?"

"It doesn't matter. I am about to start talking to myself, though, so don't mind me," I said, throwing down a report at Angela despite my words. It was a report from my local staff who were giving aid in west India after the earthquake. "I think you already know how shady things are out there, but you should also know that shadiness is beginning to spread."

The conflict between India and Pakistan was religious in nature, but also territorial when it came to Kashmir. Despite the countless military clashes, the Pakistani government offered humanitarian

support after the earthquake, which India accepted. Additionally, both countries were nuclear states.

"The relief supplies intended for India were gathered in Pakistan, but it seems they are somehow now making their way to the Afghan government. They then asked us, in secret, to supply them with weapons. Were you aware of that?"

Angela was prompted to read the report in front of her. She failed to completely hide the shock in her eyes.

Generally speaking, this form of disaster relief required the cooperation of the affected government. In this case, Japan had gathered its relief money and passed it on to Pakistan, who had then passed on relief supplies to India. The materials were delivered by a Japanese transport company, in this case the Akamatsu Corporation, which then used a local company to take care of the distribution.

The problem wasn't embezzlement of the relief money by that local company (actually, that *was* a problem, but not the main one this time) but rather that the local company was requesting materials from the Akamatsu Corporation, which were then being sent to Afghanistan. The current Afghan government, which suppressed the majority of its population, had been under fire from America and the rest of the world for harboring anti-American terrorist organizations, such as the one responsible for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. As if in response, the Afghan government recently shocked the world by blowing up the Buddhas of Bamiyan.

"There are several general trading companies which can procure everything from ramen to missiles and are happy to do so. Our own country has been stressing over getting rid of the wasteful former eastern-style weapons made by the government of Northern Japan, and with the current disastrous state of our own government, they may well have been counting on the Keika Group to do the talking. It's nice that the government is so naïve, isn't it?"

The procurement request we received asked for eastern arms and ammunition, tanks, and even combat helicopters. It was obvious they were preparing for war. As for the source of their capital, it wasn't all coming from the Pakistani government; there were traces of some of it coming from other sources too.

"Pardon me, my lady, but may I pass this information on to my friends?"

"Of course. Make sure it's clear what it means that this information ended up with me too."

Sure enough, the American government was astounded when Angela brought them my report. I would wager that it was this report that led to the American ambassador making a political display of apologizing to Prime Minister Hayashi about the submarine collision during a government-level conference.

It wasn't enough to rescue the cabinet's approval rating. The moment Secretary-General Nonaka came out with the admission that he could no longer support the cabinet was the moment it was finally pushed toward the resulting mass resignation.

Thus, a new politician took center stage: the talented man of wits our time was longing for. I hadn't yet pinpointed what kind of relationship I should have with him.

The election after the breakdown of the Hayashi administration was dragged down by the sentiment that the will of the people had become unreliable. Both the ruling party's assured victors in Chiba's gubernatorial election in March and Akita's gubernatorial candidate in April suffered crushing defeats. The whole party was now realizing that it would flail in the House of Councilors election.

After that, it was finally time for the Fellowship of Constitutional Government's leadership election, complete with two traps left behind by Prime Minister Hayashi. The first was the party member

vote. The winner of the party member vote in each prefecture would receive three votes toward the overall election.

That resulted in a total of a hundred and forty-seven votes from forty-nine prefectures, which was close to a third of the Diet members' votes. Prime Minister Hayashi put everything he had into the second trap, which was that the district votes and the Diet votes were to be counted on different days. Angela was right on the mark with what she said about that, so I'll leave her words here.

"Are they really planning to stretch out the presidential primaries over an entire week?"

They were indeed. This system made it possible to change sides partway. Losers could also drop out, making for a highly dynamic race. Knowing the future as I did, I was the only one to notice this trap: that a candidate might rely too heavily on the Diet vote, and then get kicked out of the running before it even happened.

That was why so many dietmen were rallying behind Prime Minister Hashizume, who had announced he was running.

"Should we side with him as well, Your Little Majesty?"

I picked up on a note of confusion in Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's voice on the other end of the phone. It was no wonder; as far as the babbling media was concerned, this was a one-man race.

And that one man was Koizumi Souichirou.

He was the former Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare, who in this world had even made it up to Secretary-General. Later, he would go on to be called the "lion king," and he became a star overnight as soon as he confirmed his intention to run.

I gazed absentmindedly at the TV as I answered Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa. "I hope Prime Minister Hayashi is pleased with himself. Everyone's raving about Koizumi-san now."

He was holding all the cards.

Former Prime Minister Hashizume inherited former Prime Minister Fuchigami's faction after the latter retired due to illness, but Hashizume was also one of the causes of the party's loss in the most recent House of Councilors election. There was infighting within the Hashizume Faction now concerning its policies for the imminent House of Councilors election. It was the Hashizume Faction that gave Prime Minister Hayashi his final word, and that angered Koizumi-shi; when he announced his candidateship, the party's fringe factions jumped on board. One of the candidates for Akita's gubernatorial election was the son of a prominent dietman from the Hashizume Faction who had support across the board—then suffered a major defeat. As a result of the scandal involving the Foundation for the Development of Small- to Medium-Sized Companies, a prominent dietman from the Hashizume Faction was close to being investigated, and a cabinet minister of the faction was also forced to resign. Even if former Prime Minister Fuchigami wanted to take control of the situation, his hands were tied due to the suspicions surrounding him from the scandal, and things continued until former Prime Minister Hashizume put his name forward for party leadership. Also in the running were Aso, Minister of State for Economic and Fiscal Policy, and Tsurui, former chair of the Policy Research Council, which made the regional vote that much weightier.

Ignoring the regional vote to make a comeback in the Diet vote still meant failure in the House of Councilor election; if Koizumi-shi and his fringe factions lost the party leadership, rather than retreating or seceding from the party, they would continue to fight tooth and nail in that election.

"Indeed. Even some of our younger members are rooting for him. If things go badly, we could be looking at a split faction."

I could only grimace. His slogan was to destroy the Fellowship of Constitutional Government, underpinned by three promises: postal

privatization, structural reform, and the dissolution of the zaibatsu. I could *not* back him. Yet I knew he was going to win.

What a dilemma.

"The only way forward I see is to let him do as he pleases. Though that will put us directly in the line of fire."

"Indeed, a conspicuous, newer zaibatsu like yours and the bigger ones are easy scapegoats. Do you think you can endure this?"

"I'm doing what I can to make sure I do. I'll struggle as much as I need to. Personally, I'm thinking of backing Minister Aso."

Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa faltered. It was clear he hadn't been expecting me to come up with *that* name. It was too much of a pain at this point to explain why I was making such a risky bet, so I came up with an alternative reason.

"It's a matter of the Privy Council."

"Ah."

The Privy Council was the stronghold of nobles, formerly with the power to represent the Diet when it was closed. That power had been suspended some time ago—only suspended, not repealed completely. The only system I had found that could put a stop to Koizumi-shi once he became prime minister was the Privy Council. Additionally, Minister Aso was well-known for being a dietman from a noble family himself.

"I've had my own quarrels with him in recent years, but we were close once. I suppose I can lend you a hand."

"Thank you so much."

Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa and Minister Aso used to be part of the same faction before the Fellowship of Constitutional Government became the opposition. The faction split during their time in the opposition and remained that way to this day.

While the deputy prime minister was helping me out, it was also about time for him to start thinking about the successor to his faction, which former Secretary-General Katou had gradually broken apart. I supposed Minister Aso would not be a bad choice, and in that sense, getting the deputy prime minister's help would be like killing two birds with one stone.

There was a pause before Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa spoke again. "Will he lose, even with your backing?"

"Yes. I did a lot of thinking, but I failed to come up with a scenario where he can win."

We spoke for a little longer before hanging up. The news was still playing on the TV in front of me, and they were now announcing the schedule for the leadership election's party membership votes.

"The Fellowship of Constitutional Government's party leadership has expressed its wish that the regional ballots all be counted on the twenty-third. However, some prefectures have come out and said they are not prepared to follow those demands, which the party leadership has responded to with resigned silence.

The voting days for each prefecture are as follows:

April 20: Karafuto and Chishima.

April 21: Hyogo, Hiroshima, Tokushima, Fukuoka.

April 22: Hokkaido, Aomori, Yamagata, Kanagawa, Ishikawa, Wakayama, Ehime, Kagoshima.

April 23 will see the remaining prefectures vote in the preliminary elections, and on April 24, there will be a general meeting of dietmen at party headquarters, who will then cast their votes…"

The newspaper that came out the next morning featured a certain article spread over an entire page. There was no struggling against the powerful currents of the times we lived in. I sensed this

news would push a certain contender to put his name forward for the election. Leaving the newspaper on the table, I left for school.

"Political PANDEMONIUM! Izumikawa Faction Announces Support for Minister Aso!

In a shocking move, the Izumikawa Faction has announced it is backing Minister Aso, Minister of State for Economic and Fiscal Policy, in the Fellowship of Constitutional Government's leadership election. Minister Aso and Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa were formerly in the same faction before parting company during the party's time in opposition.

The move is being seen as evidence that Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa has struck some sort of deal and is sure to raise questions regarding Koizumi-shi's popularity. Meanwhile, the announcement is likely to come as a shock to the Hashizume Faction, which previously enjoyed positive treatment by the Izumikawa Faction due to its enduring mainstream status."

Minister Aso's campaign headquarters was located in Shinjuku's Keika Hotel. Members of the Izumikawa Faction were managing it as part of the deputy prime minister's support of Minister Aso. The staff here were desperately making as many phone calls as they could.

"Yes. Your support would be most appreciated… Thank you so much."

"Have you decided who you are going to vote for in the upcoming party leadership election?"

There were few rules when it came to the leadership election. It was as legitimate to make countless calls to party members and supporters to ask for their cooperation as it was to present a senior with a mountain of cash at a luxury restaurant.

We were destined to lose, but exactly *how* we lost would affect both Minister Aso's and Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's futures,

so everyone was working as hard as they could. That included me. I wasn't holding back here.

"Excuse me! Aren't you the chair of your prefectural chapter *and* a prefectural assembly member? That means you represent the will of the people! Trust your judgment when it comes to writing that name on the ballot!"

"As I recall, the vote at the Tokyo Party Convention will see the delegate, the Youth Division, and the Women's Affairs Division have one vote each, which they will show to each other before casting. We've spoken with the Committee for Election Administration to prepare a partition… Yes. No one will be able to see the votes being cast!"

It was an attempt at meddling with the voting system. The prefectural delegate would travel to Tokyo for the party conference, despite the result already being known, as a sign of respect, hence the very specific request. I had to laugh; like I said, there were very few rules in these elections. If we still won a race like this, I'd know justice was on our side.

"What do you mean the Koizumi campaign hasn't bought a register?!"

Everyone in headquarters froze when that anonymous tip came in.

Minister Aso's reporter, who had come in with the news, cocked her head. "It's true. They haven't made any pamphlets either."

More than confusion, I was filled with a murky dread. My friends and I headed for one of the quieter rooms to have a quick drink and lend a hand to Yuujirou-kun, who had come running for our help.

"I'm sorry, Eiichi-kun, Keikain-san. I know this election is an anything-goes kind of thing—which is why I need your help." Yuujirou-kun dipped his head to me in the same manner his father had, though I elected not to mention that.

The register of party members and supporters usually listed at least their names, addresses, and contact details, but might also include their views on policies, political preferences, hobbies, and even general likes. A dietman would struggle to live without it, and to get one from a politician could seriously deplete your wallet.

"We're your friends. Of course we'll help. What do you need us to do?" I asked.

"It's nothing too difficult. We've got a couple of votes from Aso-shi's home prefecture of Fukuoka, and from my home prefecture. That sums it up for the Kanto region and, thanks to you two, we should also have Hokkaido, Chishima, and Aichi. If so, that will give us at most fifteen regional votes, and between seventy and eighty from the Diet votes. At a push, we might be able to break a hundred." Yuujirou-kun studied the map of Japan on the wall. Koizumi-shi's popularity was obvious in every region. We weren't out to win, only to put up a good fight, so there wasn't much pressure—but even then, Koizumi-shi's power was jaw-dropping.

"Koizumi-shi's about to start his soapbox speech." Eiichi-kun switched on the TV. What we were seeing wasn't the feed from a studio, but a live broadcast from the cameraman we had sent out. Anything goes in a leadership election, remember? Including getting a TV station to broadcast our hired cameraman's feed.

"Thank you for coming. Our country is currently awash with hopelessness. Why, I hear you ask? It is the ennui that comes from being caught within the triangle prison of business, politics, and bureaucracy!"

He didn't waste any time. I knew his words would resonate with people too. If you looked carefully at the screen, you could see members of the audience making calls on their cells and PHSs one after the other. Passersby were even stopping to listen.

“We must change! Without reform, we have no future! Bureaucracy has already taken the first step with the reshuffling of the ministries, and now it is the government’s turn!”

Those words, reaching us from the other side of the television, determined Japan’s fate. This man was remarkable. That much we could tell, even just hearing his voice through a screen. The TV gave this man immense power.

“I will *destroy* our Fellowship of Constitutional Government!”

The crowd erupted into cheers and applause—and didn’t stop. Everyone at headquarters had their eyes fixed on the TV now.

“Citizens of Japan! I ask that you lend your power to me and the party! Your support is all it will take to reform the government, wipe out our bad debts, dissolve the zaibatsu, and *change Japan*!”

I was entranced and utterly spellbound by his words. He had the charm to pull you in, and the country’s very real despair was enough to let him. This country was buried under a mountain of problems: the bad debt situation that was still being sifted through, the costs and addition of at least twenty million people from the unification with Northern Japan, the fact that those people were still being treated as second-class citizens, and the quarrel with Russia over northern Karafuto, to name a few. The government had not only failed to address these problems but had been kicked out after a mere six months, and all the while, the public just saw the zaibatsu growing fatter.

“We’re done for…” Mitsuya-kun murmured.

Children were honest creatures.

Despite there being nothing for him to do, Mitsuya-kun had joined us out of fear of being left out.

None of us, not even me, objected to his words.

Koizumi-shi's speech was a merciless storm that wreaked havoc on the regional votes. He won the first day's Karafuto and Chishima votes easily. On the second day, Tsurui-shi won his home prefecture, Hiroshima. Koizumi-shi took Aso-shi's home prefecture of Fukuoka, leaving him to suffer a humiliating defeat.

The humiliation was not just limited to him. Former Prime Minister Hashizume appeared to be the favorite at the very start of the race, but by the time the eight prefectures had voted on the third day, the news came in that he was considering withdrawing.

April 23 was the fateful day: the day Koizumi-shi claimed victory.

Once Koizumi-shi's victory was set in stone, I had no choice but to accept the losses in Hokkaido and Tokushima—prefectures I previously considered my power base—and resign myself to a long, long battle.

Koizumi-shi's choices for each of his staff positions, including his cabinet ministers, was just one of the peculiarities of his rule. Until now, ministers had been chosen by a candidate list put together and submitted by the leader's faction. Koizumi-shi acted as though this precedent did not exist, instead appointing four female ministers and three from outside the government, creating a cabinet that sat outside political factions. The move earned him rage from his faction and praise from the general public.

His choice of personnel would go on to hold even more merciless surprises. He selected a sworn friend as his vice president and a woman as Secretary-General, the first woman ever to be appointed to the post. Her appointment caused a stir, and Koizumi-shi's decision to keep Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa in his post as an attempt to create calm was just another entry in a long list of decisions that kept people talking.

“It’s a sign for me and me alone. There’s no doubt…” I murmured at the TV, taking a sip of my grape juice.

Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa’s official positions were now “Minister for Crisis Management” and “Minister for the Northern Karafuto Crisis.”

The Koizumi Regime liked to bring the prime minister’s enemies into his own cabinet. It was slimy. Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa himself intended to resign, but I convinced him not to. It would be vital for me to have a direct line to the Minister for Crisis Management come fall.

“Your Little Majesty, you must be careful not to underestimate him. He may be eccentric, but he is a pork-barrel politician with connections to the former Ministry of Finance and is as ensnared in factions as any other.” Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa’s tone was deep serious on the other side of the phone. “He made it to secretary-general in my cabinet and led us to victory in a general election. Then he used his official position as a shield, letting Katou-kun’s faction and the fringe factions stay within the party before the election. He was the only one to stick with former Prime Minister Hayashi until the very end, while everyone else was trying to abandon him. This is the man who appointed his sworn friend, and top of one of the fringe factions, former chair of the Policy Research Council Yamaguchi Takumi as his vice president. If not me, I wouldn’t be surprised if he had chosen Katou-kun for a ministerial position.”

“Why did Prime Minister Koizumi not attempt to rid himself of you?” I asked.

“Katou-kun and I have a long history. But perhaps Prime Minister Koizumi wanted to thank me for my part in bringing Prime Minister Hayashi to power.”

A lot of the recent political situations had former Secretary-General Katou at their center, and the question was always whether

he could make it to prime minister—but Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa got in first. It was plausible that Prime Minister Koizumi used Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa to prevent former Secretary-General Katou from regaining any power.

Prime Minister Koizumi's relationship with former Prime Minister Hayashi was deep—they were like brothers—so Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's theory also held water.

"Personally, I'm very grateful that you've retained your position within the cabinet."

"I will continue to assist you as best I can, just as I always have. But I must warn you to be careful. I cannot shake the feeling that this man will be unlike any other leader the party has seen."

Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's anxious warning was the last thing I heard before I hung up. I already knew what he said would turn out to be true. What my previous life's experience *hadn't* taught me was how his premiership would affect me in the here and now.

"A group of special deregulation zones will be created in Karafuto, Hokkaido, and Chishima, to help combat the employment problem among former citizens of Northern Japan. The detailed plans will be revealed in a conference with the state minister in charge of regulatory reform, but possible areas are Toyohara, Rubetsu, Watsukanai, Otaru, Tomakomai, Nemuro, and Abashiri, among others…"

There was a political program on television. The newly appointed ministers who appeared spoke clearly and much more quickly than their counterparts from previous cabinets.

The next situation of political interest would come about on Sunday, with a political debate program. Dietmen from both parties would play nice for the cameras, mediated by a commentator. It

would be just the kind of politics the media was after—media, made by media, for media. And he would be there: Takenaga Nobutame, Minister of State for Economic and Fiscal Policy. He was the general in Prime Minister Koizumi's war on the zaibatsu. He explained the reason behind the cabinet's pledge to dissolve the zaibatsu in a straightforward manner:

"It is not that we have come to resent the zaibatsu, but the truth is, they have drawn out Japan's bad debt problem—and that is completely down to their habit of maintaining cross-shareholdings."

The bad debt problem was an issue of both overinvestment by financial institutions and devaluation of the shares in their possession. When a bank's company tried its hand at investing in shares or land and made a loss, its own shares fell in value as a result, leaving the bank needing to recalculate its losses. If that bank's credit then grew riskier, it became more difficult for it to borrow, which in turn hindered its companies' economic activities and lowered their stock value, devolving into a spiral of loss.

"Did you know that, in Japan, nearly 100 percent of banks own cross-shares? And yet in Europe this kind of cross-ownership is practically unheard of."

There it was: helping to solve the bad debt crisis by doing away with cross-ownership of shares. I couldn't deny that it would help—as long as there were buyers for the mass of released shares.

"Compared to the rest of the world, Japan's financial market is sluggish. Our cabinet promises to make the Japanese market more attractive by enforcing the release of information and introducing market-value accounting."

This was a request from Wall Street, a plan by a flock of vulture funds to release Japanese shares into the market so they could feast on the carcasses and make a tidy profit.

Vulture funds could generally be divided into two groups. The first bought out firms on the brink of bankruptcy, poked their beaks into the business side of things, increase their value, then sold them off for a profit. The second bought a selection of bankrupt firms then disposed of them in bulk. Japan was currently more attractive to the former type, but that didn't mean the latter wouldn't try their luck too.

"Let us look at Teia Motor Co. as an example—one of the world's leading car makers. Did you know that it is strongly influenced by both Futaki-Yodoyabashi Bank and the Futaki Group? It continues to generate strong profits but is forced to use high-cost parts due to the internal cross nature of its ownership. If we untangled this conglomerate, it would be able to use cheaper parts from abroad *and* have a real shot at becoming the biggest car maker in the world. There is no reason Teia Motor Co. shouldn't be able to emulate Ayukawa Motors."

"Pffft!"

I spat out my mouthful of grape juice. Aki-san came over to wipe up the mess and get me a new glass like it was no big deal.

I had wondered what the Futaki Group and Futaki Honsha, the central pillar of Teia Motor Co.'s cross-ownership, was doing. Takenaga-shi was hitting the most straightforward nail right on the head.

"Now let's use another example: Keika Holdings. Originally a type of national bank whose job it was to tidy up bankruptcy, it has dealt with numerous bad debts and is now a global, top-class bank. However, this financial institution works under the Keika Group. There is no problem in the Keika Group making use of Keika Holdings—they bought it, after all—but *surely* there were always other places the group could borrow its money from? Especially since it is now looking into public works projects, such as building a Shinkansen line. The general contractor company hired to work on

the line has not finish dealing with its bad debts. It worries me that getting involved in unprofitable work like this risks Keika Holdings losing its world-class status."

When it came to business, the making of profit didn't always adhere to a strict timeframe. The laid-back, Japanese style of capitalism—where we could wait ten or twenty years for a profit—was about to be driven out by cutthroat western capitalism, where profit was demanded every quarter.

I was grumbling about what might happen if this government should enact these policies when my PHS rang. It was Ichijou.

"Hello?"

"Apologies for the interruption, my lady. I'm afraid it's an emergency."

"It's about Minister Takenaga's announcement, isn't it? I watched it too."

"No, it isn't, actually. I just received a call from Prime Minister Koizumi. He offered me a seat on the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy as a private member…"

I was speechless, only coming back to my senses after Ichijou had prompted me several times for a response. This man knew exactly what he was doing—and he had a second strike ready for me too.

"Prime Minister Koizumi asked the same of Teia Shuuichi-shi of Teia Motor Co., who has apparently accepted the proposal."

He got me.

I never imagined he would close in on me so quickly and so relentlessly. Ichijou was one of the few pawns, the few managing directors, at my dark disposal. Putting him on this council meant accepting influence over the control of Keika Holdings. Tachibana

was the managing director of Keika Railway, but I had switched him over to outside director.

At this point, there was only one option available to me.

"All right. Accept the position. It will be better to be able to exert some control from the inside, rather than letting them call the shots further down the line. I'm counting on you."

"If that is your wish, my lady, but please be aware that it will take me away from my current duties. We do not have the required time to recruit someone new, either from the inside or the outside, nor is anyone loyal enough."

"I am aware of that. The only thing I can do now is ask oniisama to steer the ship as a proper board member."

After finishing my conversation with Ichijou, I took some time to calm down, and then phoned oniisama. Ichijou had already informed him of the situation, so I was able to get right to the point.

"What a mess you've found yourself in, Runa."

"Yes. I've never been more frustrated with my current age than I am now. Since Ichijou will be taken away by the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy, could I ask you to become a full member of the board for Keika Holdings and keep things nice and tidy?"

"Of course. It does mean that I'll have to cancel some engagements regarding my work with Keika-Iwazaki Pharma. And here I was hoping to buy you something nice in New York, too."

New York? The name made my heart skip a beat.

"You were going to New York?"

"Yes. There is a pharmaceutical trade fair this fall, and I was invited to attend. I would have brought Sakurako-san with me too, since we have our engagement party in the summer and…hello?"

"Sorry. I didn't catch that. When was this trade fair?"

He told me the exact date I didn't want to hear. As though his fate had been set all along.

"I believe it was September 11. Yes, it's a real shame…"

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Dear God, is it really the fate of every villainess to be beset by this much despair and misfortune? And if I tried to save my cousin, meaning I *couldn't* be a villainess, then…what was I?

A NUMBER OF NEWSPAPER EXTRACTS

"The winner and losers of the recent Fellowship of Constitutional Government have been made clear. The Hashizume Faction, a major faction since it won back power from the opposition, has fallen, and the Yamaguchi and Katou Factions, which gave rise to the Koizumi-shi's premiership, have risen to new heights. Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa has been unable to move even an inch.

First, regarding Yamaguchi-shi and Katou-shi, both of whom Prime Minister Koizumi owes much for his rise to power. Yamaguchi-shi earned the position of vice president, and while Katou-shi himself is not in the cabinet, a member of his faction was appointed to a ministerial position, paving the way for a comeback after the politician's setback tied to the situation around former Prime Minister Izumikawa's successor.

Meanwhile, the Hashizume Faction has struggled to hide its shock at becoming a minor faction when it had maintained its major position since the party won power back from the opposition. While a faction member openly blamed the prime minister's method of appointing ministers for breaking up the faction, the faction cannot afford to show much more resentment in the face of the cabinet's high approval rating and the upcoming House of Councilors election.

While Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, who backed Minister Aso during the election, has stayed in office, he has acquired the undeniably unimportant post of Minister for Crisis Management,

with many voicing the view that he has overstayed his welcome in government…”

“Due to large discrepancies in the population statistics of Karafuto, the Karafuto Reconstruction Agency has decided that a new census will be undertaken, this time under the government’s direct control. The current census used existing data from the People’s Democratic Republic of Northern Japan, but when discrepancies were discovered, a conference was called to decide how to deal with the problem.

Karafuto’s population was said to be around twenty million, but this number includes the northern Karafuto territory, which is currently in a territorial dispute with Russia. This is due to factors such as the acceptance of refugees from continental Asia while the country was still under Northern Japanese rule, and Russians who fled their country’s financial crisis. The true numbers remain unclear.

Adding to the confusion of government officials are the migration records from post-unification, which confirm that at least two million citizens from the north have migrated southwards, which should have changed Japan’s population from one hundred forty million to one hundred and forty-two million.

Karafuto’s ethnic composition is said to be as follows: 50 percent Japanese, 30 percent Slavic, and 20 percent Chinese. This is vital to the understanding of the nationwide treatment of former Northern Japanese citizens as second-class according to Prime Minister Koizumi, who is now taking the first steps to a solution…”

“Karafuto’s main industries are heavy industry, natural gas exports, and fishing. However, its heavy industry in particular is suffering from deterioration of its equipment, which was built only to

eastern standards. The Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry has taken the lead in appealing to several zaibatsu for their assistance.

Formerly a national enterprise, the company now called Karafuto Heavy Industries has made a fresh start as a joint venture with the government. It now sells eastern weapons to third-world countries and conducts maintenance on them, work which has led to a marked increase in profits.

Despite the difficult economic position post-bubble, the highest quality products by eastern standards are of high enough quality that demand has risen. However, the company aims to increase its standards to those of the west as it refurbishes its deteriorated facilities.

Though the bad debt problem is still being tackled, any further delay to structural reform under the Koizumi Cabinet cannot be overlooked…"

"The discussion of gated communities, a popular concept in America, has caused a stir among members of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy. Usually translated as the phrase 'fortified city' in Japanese, these safe communities are often homes to the wealthy, surrounded by high walls, and have a highly controlled entrance. The government, however, which is currently struggling with civil unrest arising from the problem of northern Karafuto citizens being treated as second-class, has suggested the possibility of implementing these communities in a different way.

The topic was first brought up by Minister of State for Economic and Fiscal Policy Takenaga, before Ichijou-shi, a private member of the council, suggested a city built on a mega-float upon the sea. The discussion developed, leading to the idea of the city as a special ward and acceptance of migrant workers from Karafuto as residents.

Human rights organizations have criticized the plans, likening them to ‘Dejima’…”

“Thirty-four years after the second February 26 Incident, a ceremony to mourn the victims was held at the Privy Council.

Literary masters called for a full Showa Restoration and true independence for Japan and overthrow of the privileged classes such as nobility and the zaibatsu. These demands garnered sympathy from a section of the imperial police.

A battalion occupied an area of central Tokyo and murdered several people linked to nobility and zaibatsu, triggering a public security operation by the Japan Self-Defense Forces. To this day, the noble and zaibatsu classes have not forgotten the incident.

These classes have long asked the government for permission to carry weapons, and at a time where the PMC industry is undergoing rapid growth and the idea of gated communities is gaining popularity, they are hoping it is time for that wish to be granted.

Their hopes are partly due to the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy’s current debate on whether to create a separated island, where entry and exit is strictly controlled, as a solution to the second-class citizen problem. The thought is that more weapons would be required to maintain public order within the island’s walls, and that PMCs could supply those weapons, since it would be beyond the scope of the prefectural police. Tokyo Bay’s Kisarazu, Osaka Bay’s Yumeshima, Ise Bay’s Chita, and Fukuoka’s Hakata Bay are being considered as possible areas to create the island, and there are rumors that a deal is being discussed behind closed doors that would allow the prefectural police will contract PMCs to take on the defense of the city.

The Koizumi Cabinet is treating the public safety problem as an urgent political matter and is aiming to establish new laws for the

detective industry, reforming those of the security sector, and introducing a cash reward system for investigations. The opposition has opposed these laws, likening them to giving samurai to the daimyo—in this case, the noble class.

One noble said, 'The first incident could have been coincidence. The second became inevitability. We simply want protection before the third incident is allowed to happen.'"

"Minister Takenaga and Ichijou-shi have clashed fiercely within the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy, heightening tensions among all involved.

The confrontation was over proposed cuts to wasteful public works projects, put forward by the Minister and another private member. Ichijou-shi opposed the idea.

Minister Takenaga then went on TV and suggested that the money being spent on the Keika Group's Shinkansen project would be better spent somewhere else. Ichijou-shi made the firm response that, should it come to it, Keika Railway would cover the costs from its own funds. At that point the council's chair, Prime Minister Koizumi, stepped in to mediate, and both parties are said to have reconciled for the moment.

Prime Minister Koizumi snubbed his party's biggest faction, the Hashizume Faction, in the previous leadership election. The faction had a strong supporter base in the general contractor industry, in which the Koizumi Cabinet wants to force a hard landing to deal with its bad debts.

Meanwhile, Keika Railway, which is paying for the construction of the Shikoku and Shinjuku Shinkansen lines out of its own pocket, is seen as a savior for the general contractor industry. General contractors are struggling under the aforementioned hard-landing approach, causing delays in the progressing Shinkansen project.

As a result of this incident, the Hashizume Faction contacted Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, who has links with the Keika Group, resulting in a dinner between him and now-retired former Prime Minister Fuchigami at a high-class restaurant in Akasaka…"

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GLOSSARY AND NOTES:

Foundation for the Development of Small- to Medium-Sized Companies: The KSD scandal. It was a big scandal involving several notable people.

A connection with Oita Airport: A train line did exist, but the bridge was washed away by heavy rain and the line was abandoned. Only afterward was the location of the airport decided, leaving the cursed train line to wither away.

The Desert Hero and the new Secretary of State: A commander in the Gulf War and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (the top of the US military).

The Homeless Veteran Problem: There is a famous movie depicting the sorrow of a returning Vietnam veteran: Rambo. This problem still hasn't been solved.

A Small Newspaper Column: *Bungei Shunjuu's* "Nagatachou and Kasumigaseki Confidential."

Gravure Photos: *Bungei Shunjuu* used to publish nude images that were practically threesomes.

The Song Runa Sang: *Shalion* by Eri Kawai.

Training Ship/Submarine Collision: The Ehime Maru Incident. It was the final nail in the contemporary administration's coffin.

Resignation of Cabinet Minister: He later managed to make his way into the government's core and become a leader of his own faction.

Gubernatorial Election: These often come down to the ruling party versus the opposition, so they've come to be used as a gauge for public opinion on politics.

Special Deregulation Zone: This idea came from the first reshuffled cabinet, but it wasn't enough to fight back against those who opposed reform.

Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy: An important council tasked with steering Japan's economic future, with the prime minister acting as chair. Having your people on the council means having the precious opportunity to speak on the future of Japan's economy.

Karafuto's Population: You can never trust a socialist country's statistics, lol. Anybody sensible would have fled Northern Japan pre-unification, and it is thought that the population currently stands at around twenty-five million.

Structural Reform: In this world, the government of Northern Japan's parting gift was a society rife with bribery, nepotism, too many drugs and weapons to count, and bureaucracy even less efficient than Japan's. The state of Northern Japan is an inevitable hurdle in the final chapter of the fight against bad debts.

Afterword

THANK YOU for purchasing this book. I am Tofuro Futsukaichi, the author. This book covers roughly fall 1998 to spring of 2001. That was about 20 years ago from when this book was published in 2021. Looking back, part of me can't believe how much time has passed, while another part of me feels nostalgic.

It was a tumultuous time full of changes in the world, which I experienced for myself. Hopefully I properly conveyed my feelings from that time in this book. Having read it now, do you think I managed it?

A certain prime minister also joined the story fully in this volume. These days, his achievements have mixed reviews, but back when he first took the political stage, he was a real beacon of hope.

I'd like to take this opportunity to give you a little background on this series.

There are many series in the "villainess" genre on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. In the most basic sense, a villainess is a character whose purpose is to be defeated. The question is when in the story this defeat will take place; in the case of an otome game, her downfall should come at the end—the climax.

However, I noticed that, as more villainess works started being posted on *Shousetsu,* many authors no longer avoid her defeat, but instead describe her making use of her freedom after her downfall. A lot of the villainess stories popular nowadays *begin* with her defeat.

In my story, the villainess is still trying to avoid her ruin. Human lives can last close to a hundred years these days, while this series follows Keikain Runa into her teens. So what is waiting for her *after* her downfall?

That much is still a secret.

When I was writing this story, I never expected the year 2020 to be as tumultuous as it was. Real life can be far more shocking than fiction, can't it?

I'd like to give my thanks in this final paragraph.

First to the website *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, the place I told Keikain Runa's story. I really did become an author.

To the representative from Overlap, who contacted me to get the book published, and to KEI-san for your wonderful illustrations. I cannot thank you two enough.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, to everyone who helped this book to be published.

Finally, I would like to sincerely thank all the readers who bought this book. Thank you so much.

That's all from me. I'll pray that we can meet each other again in the next volume.

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